



Performing the spadework of civil rights: SNCC's free southern theater as radical place-making and epistemic justice

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Abstract The Free Southern Theater was a Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) initiative that wanted to bring theatrical performance to rural communities in the deep Southeastern United States. To interpret the critical praxis and broader analytical importance of the Free Southern Theater, we develop and apply two conceptual frameworks: radical placemaking and epistemic violence/justice. As we assert in this paper, the theater program was demonstrative of the fundamental but radical ways

SNCC sought to remake places and institutions and create new ones that would respond to the struggles of poor Black southerners, build community capacity for social change, reaffirm visions of Black belonging, and provide respite and self-care for racism-weary communities. The Free Southern Theater also reflected the value that SNCC placed on mobilizing information, communication, and the politics of representation to combat white supremacy, while also articulating and legitimizing an explicitly Black vision of society and space.

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Graphic abstract



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We have learned that the interests of black people will best be served by a revolutionary politics, and that revolutionary politics requires revolutionary art

—John O’Neal (quoted in Fabre, 1983: 57)

Introduction

Buried within the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) archives are records related to the Free Southern Theater, an arts-related activist and community engagement initiative formed in 1963 by three Black students—Doris Derby, John O’Neal, and Gilbert Moses. They had come South to participate in the civil rights movement. The Free Theater was

founded and initially headquartered in Jackson, Mississippi, where Derby and O’Neal served as SNCC field secretaries, and Moses worked as a reporter for the *Mississippi Free Press*. The Free Theater continued for 17 years before disbanding and was perhaps the longest-running SNCC initiative. Along with several other radical theater groups formed in the 1960s and 1970s, The Free Theater proved foundational in establishing a connection between theatrical practices and political activism (Harding & Rosenthal, 2006).

The Free Southern Theater highlighted the work of Black playwrights and others addressing “the moral and political dilemmas of race and rights,” staging these plays mainly for Black audiences in order “to stimulate critical, creative and reflective thought necessary for effective participation in a democratic society” (Free Southern Theater Proposal, n.d.). While unexpected for those not entirely familiar with the civil rights organization’s campaign of resistance against white supremacy, the theater is critical to

understanding the myriad of ways SNCC workers envisioned the work of the African American Freedom Struggle. Most prevailing commemorative and academic treatments of SNCC focus on its widely publicized student lunch counter sit-ins, Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer voter registration campaigns, and re-education movements. In actuality, throughout much of the 1960s, the SNCC carried out a broad array of physical, social, intellectual, and emotional labor in trying to contest racial discrimination and make interventions in the lives, experiences, and subjectivities of oppressed rural Black communities.

To interpret the critical praxis and broader analytical importance of the Free Southern Theater, we develop and apply two conceptual frameworks: radical placemaking and epistemic violence/justice. As we assert in this paper, the theater program was demonstrative of the fundamental but radical ways SNCC sought to remake places and institutions and create new ones that would respond to the struggles of poor Black southerners, build community capacity for social change, reaffirm visions of Black belonging, and provide respite and self-care for racism-weary communities. The Free Southern Theater also reflected the value that SNCC placed on mobilizing information, communication, and the politics of representation to combat white supremacy while also articulating and legitimizing an explicitly Black vision of society and space. The civil rights group recognized that meaningful gains in political and economic rights of people of color were not possible without also challenging the epistemic injustices undergirding white supremacy; the narratives that constructed people of color as an “other” and denied their experiences of racism. The actors, directors, producers of the Free Southern Theater used storytelling and bodily performance to materialize and make credible Black expression and knowledge production and push back against the discursive violence of racist, anti-Black tropes perpetuated by the Deep South’s white plantation bloc, which continued to wield power long after the Civil War (Woods, 1998).

Purpose and significance of the free southern theater

The objective of the Free Southern Theater was three-fold. First, the theater was about bringing cultural

resources to regions of the country—the Black belt agricultural districts in Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas—that ignored and underserved the majority Black population. Second, because SNCC focused on participatory democracy and the grassroots mobilization of communities for social change, the theater was another tool for racially integrated casts and crew to engage with local community-building. Within SNCC’s political philosophy, all parts of the organization—from its direct action to its communications, data research, photography, educational programs, and use of music and the arts—were key to its activism. As part of the theater efforts, SNCC workers led discussions and workshops about the plays they put on and worked to facilitate consciousness-raising activities and agendas as these performances went forward. The Free Theater members saw their work as relevant to the broader SNCC project of knowing the communities in which they worked and helping cultivate within those communities the sense of empowerment necessary for resistance (Fabre, 1983).

Finally, SNCC organizers argued that the Free Southern Theater was “the most effective means of filling the void created by the omissions and distortions of the local press, radio, and television, which effectively keep the Negro (sic) in ignorance of the problems which most directly confront him” (sic) (Free Southern Theater Proposal, n.d.). This production, spread, and use or misuse of information were some of the ways racism and the racist power structure tried to maintain and uphold white supremacy. Organizers of the Free Theater hoped to use their productions as a medium to counter this white supremacist control of information about the realities of racism and spread counterintelligence about the extent, nature, and scope of African American disenfranchisement. The Free Southern Theater is part of SNCC’s more extensive “informational praxis,” which sought to transform information about racially oppressive daily experiences into political ways of knowing and resisting that oppression (Inwood & Alderman, 2020a: 716).

Information is not passive or neutral. The collection, generation, or dissemination of facts or data, the backbone of information, refers to a more extensive array of images, stories, and representational practices that exist as a form of social power (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020). SNCC was mindful of the politics of information and knowledge production. White racist-

controlled local, state, and regional governments and the federal government used their position to spread disinformation about civil rights and the work of SNCC within communities SNCC worked. Through the use of sometimes covert but often overt intimidation tactics, these same governments undertook a campaign of terror to forestall the freedom dreams of Black residents.

The disinformation wielded by white supremacists, which remains a mainstay of contemporary racism and the ongoing resurgence of white supremacy, devalued the lived experiences and knowledge of oppressed communities. It was in the Free Southern Theater where artistic practices were deployed not merely to entertain, raise spirits, or even push back against the hegemony of racist misinformation but also to elevate and invigorate the self-image of rural and disenfranchised populations in the Black Belt. In the words of SNCC organizers, theater productions were intended to “promote the growth and self-knowledge of a new Negro(sic) audience” (Free Southern Theater Proposal, n.d.). This politics of information and knowledge production at the Free Southern Theater was carried out with social change in mind to “demonstrate that the present reality [of racial inequality] can be altered and transformed and that the Negro [sic] must play the leading role in that transformation” (Free Southern Theater Proposal, n.d.). Unpacking the creative processes behind the Free Theater offers a window into the creative activist labor of SNCC. This creative labor was part of rather than apart from community mobilization projects that challenged the hegemony of white supremacist narratives about African American life in the rural South.

SNCC’s theater program challenges us to rethink the limited ways the dominant society has defined civil rights activism. This activism is better understood as a broad array of place-(re)making work practices and mediums rather than just a specific era, set of leaders, resulting legislation, or public protest action. Place-making is central to the African American experience (Bledsoe et al., 2017; McKittrick, 2006; Woods, 1998, 2002). In particular, McKittrick’s admonition that to understand the multiplicity of ways the Black experience unfolds through place and time, it is necessary to examine the “poetics of landscape” (2006: xxiii). Within the landscape of Black Geographies, the poetics of landscape are broad, incorporating a range of expressions and resistant strategies.

These expressions connect to understandings of Black placemaking and “through theoretical, fictional, poetic, musical, or dramatic texts” that are direct “responses to real spatial inequalities” (*ibid*). McKittrick’s framing is critical for understanding the power of the Free Theater to the broader Black freedom movement. For instance, through dramatic readings, performances, story circles, and a range of artistic practices, the Free Theater engaged with grounded realities of racial oppression. The Delta region where they located most of the work was dominated by the white supremacist plantation bloc. This bloc and its monopoly on resources created conditions for many poor, rural communities not far removed from slavery (Woods, 1998). The performances of the Free Theater are connected to much longer histories of artistic expression that were important to black humanity and served as a powerful movement towards Black freedom in the face of white supremacism (Woods, 1998). In addition, the poetics of landscape and its relation to placemaking opens space:

to critique the boundaries of transatlantic slavery, rewrite national narratives, respatialize feminism, and develop new pathways across traditional geographic arrangements; they also offer several reconceptualizations of space and place (McKittrick, 2006: xxiii).

This ability simultaneously to critique existing power structures and the dominant economic and political realities of white supremacism alongside new ways of understanding and conceptualizing space is critical for understanding the underlying geography of the US civil rights movement and specifically the work of SNCC in the deep Southeastern US. As we argue, the effort of SNCC to engage in radical place-making as a means for securing the freedom aspirations of African Americans and others who are racially constructed as outsiders or threats to the existing racial order expands the temporal understanding of the Movement. Moving beyond seeing the civil rights movement as an era bounded by a start and end date, seeing the Movement as a radical place-making effort locates the struggle as an always and everywhere unfolding project that is not complete. By contextualizing the Movement within the framework of radical placemaking and its connection to Black Geographies theoretically and materially grounds the project within ever-shifting landscapes of domination and resistance and comes

to see the movement as an engagement with material realities Black humanity. In so doing, we can reorient scholarly attention away from merely documenting or retelling the movement's story and instead of locating the efforts within a broader activist praxis that continues long after the actions of specific organizations or movements have faded away. This focus shifts attention away from the normative top-down understanding of the struggle. It establishes instead the necessity of acknowledging and understanding the grassroots nature and community-centered approach to civil rights organizing and activism that is a continuous process of struggle.

Second, the Free Southern Theater is of analytical value because its emphasis on offering anti-racist artistic expression, perspective, and information prompts us to consider the broader knowledge struggles behind racial equality. While certainly carried out in public spaces filled with marchers and protestors, those struggles also took place (and still takes place) in a multitude of everyday creative activist spaces, where the epistemic violence of white supremacy could be named and countered. Epistemic violence or injustice captures the power-laden nature of who and what we come to know, who counts as knowers, and which (whose) knowledge about life is recognized (or silenced) publicly (Fricker, 2007; Spivak, 1988). Accompanying and underlying the widely acknowledged systems of physical and social harm against Black communities has always been (and remains) a regime of epistemic violence that actively denies and de-legitimizes full knowledge of how racism works against and harms oppressed communities.

To capture the power-laden nature of epistemic violence and the role that SNCC played in countering narratives of black disempowerment, we turn to the idea of "Spadework." According to Ella Baker, perhaps the key advisor to SNCC, spadework involves the complex, often unseen, and politically fraught work of cultivating everyday grassroots empowerment and resistance and fostering locally based and grassroots-led initiatives to take on white supremacy (Ransby, 2003). Regrettably, the spadework Baker preached does not have a central place within the public memory of the civil rights movement dominated by charismatic leaders, highly visible campaigns, and federal legislation (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008). Our goal is to draw greater attention to the hidden geographies that underlie the moments and

places of civil rights spadework by excavating and theorizing these neglected moments and places. The Free Southern Theater is one such moment. As we demonstrate, its history and relevance go beyond providing crucial cultural space for the expression of Black empowerment in a region of the country where those expressions were dangerous to the white authorities.

Additionally, by focusing on the spadework of civil rights, we also want to draw attention to the specific ways our collective understanding of civil rights work is gendered. In many popular retellings of the civil rights struggle, we focus on charismatic leaders or big moments (e.g., March on Washington, Birmingham Campaign), focusing on a few key leaders. What is lost in this retelling is a broader understanding of the full array of civil rights struggles that were occurring in the Deep South *and* perhaps most importantly, how much of the unseen and unremarked upon labor was done by women and poor peoples who were struggling not only to overcome racism but also to address patriarchy and other forms of exploitative conditions within the communities that they lived and worked. Spadework refers to the hard and unseen labor that took place within SNCC organized communities. Still, as we demonstrate, it also calls forth a vision of civil rights organizing focused on the gendered labors that took place and have place in a broader retelling of the movement.

Finally, because SNCC was focused on spadework and locating the oppressive conditions that existed on the ground and within the communities, they were working in, SNCC deployed various tools, strategies, and locations to pursue justice. This paper picks up these challenges and explores the theatre's purpose, significance, and creative practices, situating it within SNCC's mobilization goals and the region-specific realities of living with and against racism in the Deep South. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the still-nascent literature on the civil rights movement's historical geography and shed light on an under-analyzed chapter in Black Geographies.

Free southern theater and epistemic denial of black agency

The Free Southern Theater offered an intervention in the epistemic denial of black suffering, resistance,

ways of seeing, and making place. As a result, we argue that SNCC's staging of theatrical productions was not just meant to be of informational value but was a means of information sharing that SNCC felt essential to combating racism. Indeed, according to Medina (2013), cultivating resistance among excluded and stigmatized groups require epistemic interactions in which they can listen and learn from one another and engage in mutually enriching exchanges of perspectives. By exploring this contestation and examining the Free Southern Theater's broader political and cultural context, we argue that civil rights activists and SNCC specifically were engaged in a complex and multifaceted struggle over representations to enact a more expansive political project of black empowerment related to radical placemaking. As Phillips notes, "the struggle over images is not just 'purely academic,' but takes place in a wider, intellectual, political and spiritual arena" (1993: 181). This arena is grounded in specific geographic realities. By engaging with the Free Theater and the way activists and artists came together with communities and we can begin to untangle the often-complex role that the contestation over images of Black life plays in resisting broader normative white supremacist practices that come to define how we understand our places within broader racial, gender and sexual hierarchies.

The discipline is witnessing the growth of "creative geographies," an approach that stresses the role of artistic practices as legitimate ways of analyzing dominant modes of knowledge production and envisioning new worlds and places (Hawkins, 2019). These creative methodologies and moments of cultural activism do not merely construct new meanings about space but also influence the "prospects for a new progressive political opening" and motivate for social change (Buser et al., 2013: 606). Decades before these academic revelations, SNCC was actively using creative methodologies to articulate Black socio-spatial visions. Beyond the formal confines of the theater, the civil rights organization realized the broader emancipatory power of creative methods, having brought drama-based learning in Freedom Schools in 1964 to allow African American students to write about, improvise, and perform real-life struggles with racial inequality. According to one Freedom School student in Ruleville, Mississippi, "Creating and doing plays brought out expression about...experiences developed creativity...helped students to

discuss and propose solutions to the problems they were facing in their communities" (quoted in Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998: 522). Thus, our investigation into the Free Southern Theater speaks to more general themes in Black Geographies and the making and remaking of the cultural and political landscapes and acknowledging an organic intellectualism and spatial imagination that has always operated within communities of color. As a result, this paper represents a historical analysis and contemporary resonance within efforts to counter a resurgent and militarized white supremacist reality through a broader reading of the poetics of radical place-making.

Understanding racism in the deep south

While white supremacy is central to understanding the United States' racial landscape (Bonds & Inwood, 2016), the specific ways that racism and white supremacy takes place are geographically differentiated (Pulido, 2006). Within the Deep South—the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas as well as parts of Georgia—there is a long history of plantation agriculture, particularly cotton production, creating one of the most brutal regimes of white supremacist rule in the nation (Aiken, 2003; Wilson, 2000; Woods, 1998). Clyde Woods describes the political economy in this region as the "plantation bloc" (1998). Cemented by near-monopolistic control over agricultural and manufacturing production as well as access to the banking system and the region's two most important natural resources, land and water, the bloc exerted near-total power over the lives and fortunes of the peoples who lived and worked within the region (Woods, 1998: 4). For poor sharecroppers, the plantation bloc was the arbiter of their lives and fortunes. It was within this very southern plantation bloc that SNCC often worked, deploying organizers from the outside the South and recruiting activists from within the region to contest white supremacy in some of the most dangerous and inhospitable places to civil rights in the United States.

White supremacy was/is a political-affective project that structured not only the distribution of formal and informal social and economic rights but created broader "atmospheres" of fear and anxiety deeply felt by people of color (Inwood & Alderman, 2018). A white supremacist social order is sustained by

inflicting upon people of color symbolic and discursive violence and physical and structural violence (Jiwani, 2009). Within this oppressive system developed a series of socially constructed tropes, ideas, and knowledge claims that not only justified the plantation bloc's control but cemented a series of racist, demeaning images of African American life that took on the power of social fact to much of the region's white population and hampered the political consciousness of even some communities of color. Indeed, SNCC leaders like Charles Sherrod noted the importance of African Americans breaking away from the "personal box" imposed by racial inequality and "let the [black] man [sic] see himself as he really is and then as he can be" (Sherrod n.d.: 2).

These harmful images and discourses portrayed African Americans negatively and operated by denying Black people's humanity, dignity, and agency. These tropes were part of a "narrative economy" (Hoskins, 2010) central to the plantation bloc's exercise of control and power; they acquired value and presumed legitimacy as they intersected with other stories and social practices and circulated across not only the region but among larger national and international audiences. One dominant trope, what Woods describes as "plantation romance" (1998: 52), has proven to have high currency, circulating for generations in popular literature and media as well as being deeply inscribed into the region's festivals, marketing campaigns, symbolic forms, and heritage tourism destinations. Nowhere is this more apparent than southern plantation house museums, traditionally infamous for ignoring and marginalizing the story of slavery, the enslaved, and their descendants. The accomplishments, possessions, and lifestyle of the white planter class are valorized at these sites. At the same time, they propagate caricatures of simple-minded, happy-go, lucky slaves, if enslavement is discussed or mentioned at all (Modlin, 2008). A "symbolic annihilation" of the full history and identity of Black communities is actively carried out through these museums (Eichstedt & Small, 2002: 105). The plantation romance trope—which continues today—betrays the savagery of slavery and neo-slavery—the system of Jim Crowism and sharecropping—following emancipation (Blackmon, 2009) and whitewashes the brutal histories of violence, lynching, forced family separations, and rape that were central to plantation agricultural practices. Steve Hoelscher

describes this whitewashed history as an "invented tradition" designed to extend white supremacism (2006: 40). Notably, the epistemic injustice of the plantation romance trope is not just that it privileges a white worldview but that it also closes down our ability to understand and acknowledge what McKittrick (2011) calls a "black sense of place," a term meant to capture a contested state of being and belonging for African Americans.

The (mis)representations of black life that white supremacists deployed to dehumanize Black people within the Deep South were part of a more extensive system of global economic production that is connected to what McKittrick describes as "the interlocking workings of modernity and blackness," which culminate "in long-standing, uneven racial geographies" (2013: 3). McKittrick argues that the plantation and its production system are central to understanding the development of the Deep South but are connected to the growth of global capitalism and the landscapes on which the economy rests. Thus, the plantation and its regimes of ownership are central to how racial capitalism unfolded over time and through space. Perhaps most importantly, the specific geographic configurations of place and power that come together in the Deep South created distinct landscapes of domination and resistance. This contestation over the geography of the region is, as we argue, central to understanding how and in what ways SNCC worked to take on white supremacism (Inwood & Alderman, 2020a, b). While there are myriad ways to explore this reality of domination and resistance, we focus on the contestation over images and representations of black life within the region.

Historically the white supremacist power structure was vested in presenting African Americans as willing participants in their exploitation. Racist images of the "mammy"—a powerful myth of the faithful female slave perhaps made most famous in the movie and novel *Gone with the Wind* or the musical *Showboat* (McElya, 2007)—as well as other images of black life reinforced patriarchal and paternalistic views of the racial caste system as well the myth that African Americans were somehow incapable of full cultural and political citizenship. More menacing, the images of black men and the supposed danger they represented served as justification for brutal lynching and torture killings that were a primary tool used to keep black people in their place (Alderman et al., 2018).

These images and others served racist tropes and reinforced a range of stereotypical and dehumanizing understandings of black people in the United States.

White supremacist images are also resisted by African American peoples who are conscious of how these images demean black people and how they are used to further the interests of a commodified Black subject. The proliferation of the Blues, Jazz, the explosion of the Harlem Renaissance were all examples of how Black communities turned racist stereotypes on their head and fueled expressions of Black life that ran counter to the dominant racist stereotypes of the era. As Clyde Woods (1998) demonstrated in his work on the Mississippi Delta, the Blues epistemology represents the material practice and a politics of emancipation while also countering dominant racist tropes of black life. This contestation over images and material methods is central, as we argue, to understanding the broader work around place-making through the Free Theater. As the civil rights struggle unfolded, SNCC, in particular, was engaged not only in understanding the material conditions which existed on the ground (Inwood & Alderman, 2020a) but in affecting the kind of material change to remake those spaces. Through radical place-making processes, SNCC was moving beyond what counts as traditional civil rights practice. Instead, it was engaged in a deeper and more profound geographic remaking of the communities they worked in and with. We detail how these processes play out in the subsequent section on place-making,

Free southern theater as radical place-making

Following Pierce et al. (2011: 54), we define place-making as “the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live.” When placed within the framework of the landscape of poetics, McKittrick explains it is important to focus on the geographies of every day “that are normally undermined or prohibited” and to also focus on the way “traditional racial and sexual geographic inequalities are re-expressed in a medium that can bear to take on difference: black fiction, black theory, black musics, black geographies, black imaginations” (2006: 21). Within this framework, the work of the Free Theater takes on added significance. By bringing

artistic mediums into the communities that black people lived, the theater drew from the communities in which they worked. They ran workshops on playwriting and even performed some of the plays written by Delta residents. The Theater also translated the Black experience into material expressions of the Black imagination. These expressions are the work of place-making within the space of the theater.

For example, scholarship has focused on the way place-making is networked into a broader set of cultural, economic, and political processes, the critical insights that place-making can lend to an understanding of political struggles, and how the contestation underlying place-making involve actors and groups with varying power deploying competing “place-frames” as they deploy specific place identities for strategic, political aims (Pierce et al., 2011). While Pierce and colleagues (2011) note a solid tendency to examine hegemonic framings of the identity and meaning of places and who belongs and matters within those places, they also point to a need to examine “a rich and variegated set of place-frames” produced and negotiated at a variety of scales, through a range of networked political practices, and by a diversity of locational and political communities (p. 59).

Within the context of race, place, and civil rights, this tendency often focuses on specific events and individuals at the expense of the broader economic and political forces that were central to shaping conditions and circumstances in the first place. When it comes to the broader civil rights movement, it is essential to contextualize the Movement in the 1950s and 1960s within a broader geopolitical reality of cold war and anti-communist geopolitics. The confluence of broadcast television images that went around the world and cold war politics in which the Soviet Union challenged the United States to win the hearts and minds of the developing world made the efforts to secure voting rights and desegregate society more potent. The federal government could not abide civil rights protesters being beaten and murdered in non-violent protests while simultaneously challenging the Soviet Union’s human rights record. Civil rights leaders knew this, and as a result, there were efforts to select cities and regions in which a violent reaction by the white supremacist establishment was more likely. This is revelatory of the dialectical interplay between local places—Birmingham, Alabama, and the violent racist Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor—and broader geopolitical

considerations that went into the Movement to secure black freedom.

This interplay between local realities and broader processes is central to how place-making and civil rights come together through the circulation and contestation over images. Recall that dominant images of (neo) plantation life legitimize white supremacism central to regimes of domination and control. These images of docile, inferior slaves, and later sharecroppers tied into local and national discourses and became essential drivers of local and regional economies. Regional officials contested images that went against this or which were considered dangerous. They often controlled the news reporting and information sharing necessary to connect black communities' oppressed conditions and experiences with broader operations of racial capitalism, violence, and discrimination. Even more sympathetic actors in the national media-constructed depictions of civil rights protest proved highly selective and exclusionary: “[j]ournalists' interest waxed and waned along with activists' ability to generate charismatic personalities (who were usually men) and telegraphic confrontation, preferably those in which white villains rained down terror on non-violent demonstrators dressed in their Sunday best” (Dowd, 2005: 1236). According to Dowd (2005), news coverage of these confrontations distorted public understanding by making them appear “to come out of nowhere, to have no precedents, no historical [and geographic] roots” (p. 1236).

SNCC and its associated activists understood these representational politics. As a result, the organization was engaged in a complex struggle to historicize and spatialize the story of civil rights and claim power over the circulation of images that would reframe African Americans' place within the white spatial imaginary while raising the consciousness of oppressed black communities. Returning to McKittrick and the poetics of landscape. She explains dominant geographic patterns—segregation and the plantation bloc in the Deep South—normalize spatial hierarchies and create and enforce dominant ways of being within those places (2006: 145). These spaces undermine Black humanity. It also creates conditions that make space and spatial arrangements of oppression appear fixed within space and through time (*ibid*). Challenging these realities is central to anti-racist praxis and, perhaps critically, spatial practice that does challenge

these realities and can be read “beyond the margins” (McKittrick, 2006: 146).

For example, in an attempt to take a direct role in the flow of information and discourse from and about the Deep South, SNCC created a photography department staffed by a team of activist photographers and field secretaries, and everyday community members equipped with cameras. The resulting photographic images were intended to promote and lend legitimacy to the community organizing activities of SNCC and document and provide visual proof of the violence of white supremacists (Raiford, 2007). However, they also served a more profound epistemic justice and place-remaking agenda. By taking and publishing pictures of the lives of ordinary black people in the rural South and showing their dignity, resilience, and struggles, the SNCC Photo Department sought to create resistant geographic knowledge of Black subjectivity and the region that combatted racist media coverage and more sympathetic public portrayals that emphasized the passivity and victimhood of oppressed southern communities of color.

Organizers of the Free Southern Theater, like SNCC photographers, were engaged in the form of cultural activism, “activism that calls upon art and creative practices to disrupt commonly held assumptions and expectations often by forging alternative spatial imaginaries or meanings” (Buser et al., 2013: 607). According to Buser et al. (2013), because cultural activism generates a “shared aesthetics of protest,” it is directly related to the politics of place-making and the reconfiguring of socio-spatial relations, identities, and perceptions constituted within and through those places of creative practice. Allen et al. (2019) argue for the conceptualizing of Black Geographies in terms of place-making and a consideration of the full range of ongoing practices, representations, and contestations—many of them expressive acts and images—that shape and are shaped the black production of knowledge and geographic experience. According to them, this place-making is inherently relational, a perspective that encourages us to consider the bundles of discourses, objects, experiences, peoples, and social and material elements that oppressed communities have long assembled to enact particular socio-political goals and black senses of place.

Within geographic circles, the civil rights struggle is infrequently discussed in terms of the cultural

activism of place-making. However, the Movement saw several moments of "radical place-making" as part of the broader geographic spadework of mobilizing for equality (Bottone et al., 2018). Radical place-making is a process by which activists, communities, and even ordinary citizens appropriate places or create them outright in defiance of white supremacism. This radical claiming and remaking of geography is about more than merely creating a new material site or location of expression (which has not always been necessary for diasporic and dispossessed communities). However, it is a broader transformation of the power relations, meanings, experiences, and conceptions of self and belonging that help defines one's place. While popular memory tends to recount those highly publicized moments when civil rights activists have temporarily claimed and occupied civic spaces for protests, Black radical place-making can and is about seeking a more permanent and less spectacular but no less politically essential means of asserting the value and legitimacy of a Black socio-spatial vision and the "life-building" that accompanies people of color creating their spatial praxis (Bledsoe, 2017).

By producing specific anti-racist plays and workshops and discussions about those plays, the theater program hoped to make a direct local, place-based intervention in the cultural lives, political consciousness, and geographic experiences of hosting and attending communities. The everyday landscapes of churches, schools, auditoriums, streets, and even cotton fields were converted into stages for performing against white supremacy and narrating a knowledge about racism and being Black in America that, as we have argued, worked across the epistemic injustices of racism. While the theater by design moved from location to location within the South, the hope was this conversion of space would have lasting changes in how people of color placed themselves within the project of American democracy. Second, the Free Southern Theater hoped to bring even greater social and spatial visibility and permanence to its place-making, creative practices, and the relationships it built with its community audiences. Organizers hoped to use the theater to create a new institution within the Deep South; in their words, to "stimulate the growth of indigenous community theater," to fashion a forum for Black experiences and creative expressions, and to create "a new idiom, a new genre, a theatrical form as unique as blues, jazz, or gospel" (Free Southern

Theater Proposal, n.d.). [Image One about Here. Caption: Map Created by SNCC nd. From: Dent et al., 1969]).

Theater producers viewed their cultural activism as part of rather than apart from the better-known civil rights place-remaking efforts happening in the Deep South. They wrote in a report: "The Free Southern Theater is as much a product of 'the movement' as voter registration, community centers, or the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party" (Free Southern Theater Special Report, n.d.).

In thinking about the significance of the place-making and cultural activism that occurred at and through the Free Southern Theater, it is perhaps helpful to critically consider the different kinds of geographies needed to motivate and sustain civil rights struggle. In addition to needing places for direct action, mobilization, and street-level protests, and places of formal political education, the Movement required the making of what Allen (2020) calls "places of respite." These places of respite are produced by and productive of a Black sense of place and provide—along with refuge and recovery from racism—a means for oppressed communities to create and engage images, knowledge, and storytelling that resonate with and affirm Black life and freedom struggle. Allen uses the words resonance and resonates strategically, recognizing the affective power that sound and the sensory practice of listening can play in evoking "feelings of belonging and affirmation" and using counter-story telling to oppose anti-Black myths and stereotypes and to amplify Black visions, voices, and experiences within society (Allen, 2020). These points are especially salient to understanding the radical place-making work that staged anti-racist performances of the Free Southern Theater promised to carry out, not only by providing an escape from the demeaning tropes of white supremacy but in also creating a new kind of sensory and experiential place for knowing and feeling an alternative, Black visions of society and space—one that was just affectively, socially and epistemologically.

Contesting images

In *The Selling of Civil Rights*, Mumphree (2006) argues contesting images and engaging in a broader strategy of informing local, national, and international

audiences is an underappreciated aspect of civil rights activism. Mumpfree quotes Mary King, a prominent SNCC organizer and the director of SNCC's communication department, who asserted that "communication goes to the very heart of how non-violent struggle works" (Mumphree 2006:3). Describing how racism has operated through American history, the reinforcement of white supremacism has long relied on a set of stereotypical images and understandings that worked to dehumanize Black people (Mumphree 2006). This visual inscription of the racial hierarchy reinforces images of Black life and Black people as undeserving of the rights granted to the majority white population. Recall from the previous section that the Deep South's plantation bloc's anti-Black tropes were/are central to the creation of modernity and that these images circulate within the United States and internationally. Bledsoe and Wright (2019: 9) explain that forms of anti-Black racism and the worlds that are created by processes that deny black humanity is "imbricated in prevailing and developing political-economic practices" that come to animate social, political, and economic structures that naturalize what Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as "racisms death-dealing displacements" (Gilmore 2007: 6). SNCC was struggling with these realities. As a result, SNCC's communication strategy focused on contesting these images not only for domestic consumption but also by highlighting the brutal and inhumane ways black people were being treated in the Deep South for international audiences. The Free Theater is an essential link in this process.

In a 1964 article written by Free Southern Theater founders Doris Derby, Gilbert Moses, and John O'Neal (1964, np), they note that the theater program is a necessary counterweight to knowledge construction in Mississippi that denies the realities of white supremacism. Focusing on both the education system and the control and flow of information through local media, they describe how the majority Black population are sent to "a public-school system that restricts the learning process, rather than nourishes it. School textbooks are controlled, and discussion of controversial topics are forbidden" (1964, np). The article goes on:

The Newspapers in Mississippi are not sources of information concerning the activities of the community or the state. These newspapers' distortions are twofold: what is not printed—

any valid information about Mississippi economics and politics; and what is published—the highly distorted and biased articles supporting the Mississippi [white elite] "way of life." The one Negro (sic) weekly, other than the *Free Press*, is being used as a showcase for the Barnett [segregationist Governor of Mississippi] administration to portray the Mississippi Negro as satisfied with Mississippi's conditions.

At least two themes emerge from these passages and are essential to consider when understanding how SNCC struggled against a set of racialized epistemic violences at the heart of white supremacism. First, as Bledsoe and Wright remind us, anti-blackness is predicated on the "casting of Black spaces as lifeless and open to appropriation" (2019: 13). This appropriation of Black space has implications for a wide variety of processes, including gentrification and urban renewal projects, but also in the way information and systems of knowledge generation come to create discursive understandings of Black life and hence the value and respect afforded that life (or not) through material socio-spatial practices. Foundational to anti-Black racism is the denial of humanity and cultural significance to African Americans and, most geographically relevant, the making of Black space and place. As Katherine McKittrick (2011) explains in her seminal piece *On Plantations*, perspectives of race grounded in anti-Black racism come to reify "racial-colonial categories" that denies agency, reinforce historical and patriarchal understandings of black/white relationships, deny the violence inherent in a white supremacist socio-economic order and naturalize dispossession (948). Derby, Moses, and O'Neil explain why the Free Theater was necessary to focus our attention on the ways images and stereotypes circulate through the press and in the school system and come to justify broader processes of accumulation and dispossession that are central to the workings of racism. As the Free Theater article explains, "a theater is unique as a means of education, but also can create the opportunity for the human dimension that the present caste system is calculated to deny—the development of human dignity. Theater demonstrates that reality can be transformed and that within this transformation, the Negro plays the leading role" (np). A playbill from the middle 1960s explains, "The Free Southern Theater exists [...] for those slapped in the

face by ignorance from newspapers and other mass media because of their skin" (no date). The emphasis on being slapped in the face by the ignorance of racist media alludes to the harm that such disinformation can do to the African American Freedom Struggle and the "Black place of respite" from this harm (Allen, 2020) that the Free Southern Theater hoped to provide. Flowing through theatrical performances and discussions was a Black self-care that producers hoped to facilitate by affirming and performing a Black production of knowledge and expression of experience.

The structure of the Free Southern Theater performances themselves varied depending on the scale and scope of the play but also on local conditions. In rural places where performances were in front of share-croppers and primarily poor people, they could be staged in the middle of a cotton field on a hastily built platform. When the theater went to larger cities like Jackson, Mississippi, or New Orleans, Louisiana—where the theater program would be based for most of its career—they often performed in community centers with more infrastructure. Moreover, Fabre (1983) notes that Black communities did not all respond favorably to the idea of radical theater; there were differences in receptivity by social class and urban versus rural location. Because the Free Theater saw itself as an educational medium that was resisting and contesting racist images of Black life and seeking to raise and sometimes unsettle consciousness within Black communities, the plays themselves were often followed up with community discussions and workshops that discussed the main themes and critical insights that the plays focused on. An early focus of the theater was the play *In White America* by Martin Duberman. Covering 85 years of history, the play focuses on Black life in the United States from slavery through the 1940s. In explaining why the play was influential, SNCC theater performers noted that in many of the communities in which they worked, theater performers were astonished to discover that the local people appeared to have never heard of W.E.B Du Bois or Marcus Garvey, had no idea about the history of Reconstruction or its aftermath.

While oppressed Black audiences may have lacked formal education in the history presented by theater producers, they undoubtedly had their own equally legitimate inter-generationally transmitted collective memories of white racial control and Black resistance. This knowledge is critical to understanding Black

resistance to the plantation bloc and white supremacy in this region. Clyde Woods (1998) has termed this kind of knowledge "Blues Epistemology" knowledge that emerges from black communities and results from spatial praxis and understanding local economic, social and cultural realities. The Free Theater sits within this broad placemaking framework, and in fact, the lived experiences with racism are knitted onto and reinforced or challenged by watching *In White America*. Indeed, the SNCC archives indicate that Free Southern Theater performances were dialogic, forums in which community members in attendance were encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings during and after the play. In making plays so participatory and leading workshops, theater performers were engaging in a broader process of consciousness-raising that was central to the work of SNCC. In a playbill that describes the significance of *In White America* for the community, the Free Theater notes: "The play points up in scene after scene the betrayal by the American government and the American people in the hopes and aspirations of its largest minority" (No author). While theatrical performances were noteworthy in framing, transmitting, and legitimizing an explicit Black knowledge of America for public consumption, its full consciousness-raising power came from more than its revolutionary content or images. Instead, the free theater's educational power also resulted from how it facilitated epistemic interactions (Medina, 2013) among community members and SNCC workers. The theater created a place of political-emotional refuge and recovery—where audiences could gain greater confidence after enduring racialized humiliation and free themselves in part from the fear of white punishment, and think or say what they liked regarding new ideas about civil rights introduced by SNCC as well as their own long-repressed everyday resistant visions about Black agency, whether it was DuBoisian or not.

Recall from earlier in the paper that SNCC field secretary and Albany, Georgia leader Charles Sherrod noted that in every community that SNCC worked, there existed a "black box." Composed of personal experiences and broader understandings of one's place within the racial caste system, Sherrod argued what was needed was a program that could tear down and break open that box could allow black men and women to see themselves as they really are. Because SNCC was focused on community empowerment and the

spadework of organizing local people to take on the struggle for their liberation, breaking down the existing knowledge structure and the contestation of the ways black life was represented as a central piece of how and in what ways this project moved forward. In documents located in the archives, the founders of the Free Southern Theater explain:

The civil rights movement has dramatically affected the vacuum in which the Mississippi Negro [sic] lives. Yet, it is still probably that the Negro is the last to be informed of a situation that directly concerns him. He has been unable to develop naturally because he has found himself in a society that excludes him from its public consciousness, which is, by necessity, his public consciousness (Derby, Moses, O’Neal 1964: 3-4. Underline in original).

The document notes that Mississippi, in particular, has a system of racism designed to destroy black people and refuse African Americans true knowledge of themselves and the conditions that exist that make the reality of anti-Black racism foundational to the Mississippi experience.

By putting on performances that not only reinterpreted American history and culture through an explicitly Black lens but also by encouraging local performances and, at times incorporating locals into the performances, the Free Theater was indicative of how SNCC sought to work towards building a broader movement and a radical place for self-liberation. As an organization, SNCC was different from the other civil rights groups working at the time. Infused with an understanding of organizing from Ella Baker, they wanted to empower local communities to take on their oppression through a grassroots campaign of self-determination and local organizing. Working in the most vulnerable communities in America and facing extreme forms of Southern plantation violence, SNCC workers were committed to creating conditions in local communities that were empowering and connected to local, grassroots democracy. To accomplish that broader mission, SNCC wanted to engage in a radical education program that provided the means and tools for people in rural communities to access information that could help them undertake civil rights activism but in the long-term would actively cultivate conditions that cemented those gains.

Because of the kind of work that SNCC was engaging in, the Free Theater also served a broader purpose: providing a space of respite and recreation. Christina Larocco (2015) explains that despite the best intentions of the theater producers, at times, the actors and activists grew frustrated when theater attendees were more interested in relaxing or just enjoying the performances and not so much so in the radical democratic traditions that SNCC worked to bring into the theater space. These frustrations and the challenges of organizing communities for social change indicate Ella Baker’s “spadework” and how the Free Theater had to engage in the sometimes fraught process of acknowledging and working within the needs, experiences, and interpretations of oppressed Black audiences. As Larocco (2015) notes, this frustration often hid a more subtle, if not at times, equally important role, a kind of politics of respite. For poor, rural communities that state and local officials underserved, the theater space turned into a space where people could relax after the end of a long day. Sometimes, it was the only space in the segregated South that Black people could gather outside of church. Denise Nichols (n.d.), a theater member, explains: “So many of our audience members hadn’t seen a live theatrical performance before. There was awe, consternation, laughter, sadness, pride, and sometimes solemnity.”

The challenges and frustrations of SNCC organizers and theater performers belie the vital work that occurred in providing spaces for primarily African American sharecroppers to come together in a venue that provided a release from the toil and ongoing labor of plantation life. Again, artistic performance and creativity were central to the cultivation of Woods’ “Blues Epistemology” (Woods, 1998), a way of seeing and understanding the world and making sense of the deprivations, and articulating shared and vital humanity that existed within Black communities in the Mississippi Delta. The Blues also provided space for Black people to blow off steam and organize and reinforce a Black sense of place.

Of course, the respite and refuge that the theater program offered oppressed communities were not by any means complete or free from white intimidation; violence would cause plays to be canceled. The theater company required their own security. Indeed, Denise Nichols remembers that theater participants “were harassed, arrested, followed, had bombs thrown at stages while we performed” (Nichols nd). Before

1965, when the Free Southern Theater decided it would exclusively become “a Black theater for Blacks, performed and managed by Blacks,” it welcomed racially mixed audiences. But whites were often hostile to the theater program, claiming it was communist in nature, and white officials would attend shows accompanied by a more significant police presence. As Fabre (1983: 56) recounts: “In 1964 at Indianola [Sunflower County, Mississippi], a rural town, the birthplace of the White Citizens Council, white police cars, forty-two helmeted policemen, a sheriff accompanied twenty-five white citizens—lawyers, professionals, and a few farmers; they sat in the back of the theater, which was filled with local Blacks.”

As the Free Theater grew and evolved politically to “assert itself as a Southern and all-Black institution,” it began to offer plays and performances that highlighted Black authors and were focused more directly on experiences within the Mississippi Delta Region and the rural southern Black experience (Fabre, 1983: 57). These plays tended to draw out the audience, and as the theater developed, the cast and crew became more adept at leading discussions. In a famous example that Christina Larocco (2015) documented through the performance of the play *Waiting for Godot*, she describes the reaction of Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the most critical civil rights organizers of her generation. In this play, two men are waiting by a bench for someone named Godot to arrive, who never does. In the course of the play, the two men discuss a variety of issues and events. In describing the discussion that ensued after a performance in which Ms. Hamer attended, the producers noted that she “got the message immediately.” They stated:

She [Ms. Hamer] said to the audience: “We’re not like these two white guys. We’re not waiting anymore for somebody to show up and give us what we need to go forward. We’re taking this into our own hands, voting, and expressing ourselves. That’s what we have to learn from this play.

This passage highlights how the politics of respite isn’t just about having a space to decompress or escape; far from that, it is a space to think and react to one’s situation or place in the world. The reality is that few places in the tightly controlled white supremacist Deep South allowed for the kind of communal space

and affective atmosphere necessary to focus on larger messages regarding civil rights. In giving sharecroppers and others this type of space, the Free Theater was engaging in a politics of respite, and that was about (re)creating a politics of freedom. This connects the Free Theater with the politics of radical placemaking in at least two ways. First, it was about designing and constructing a creative space in which mostly rural and poor sharecroppers could experience aspects of Black culture and history in a venue outside of the normative, white supremacist power structure. This was a space outside of the plantation bloc’s control, and this connects the Southern Free Theater to a broader politics associated with Blues Epistemology. Second, because this space was outside of normative control, it facilitated a broader consciousness-raising that exceeded the performance itself. One of the powers of artistic expression is how it allows for escape from the drudgery and toil of everyday life. By providing rest and recreation as well as a counter-storytelling against racist tropes, the Free Southern Theater created a radical place for affirming and amplifying Black socio-spatial visions of both performers, playwrights, and audience members, opening up more potential space for an anti-racist informational praxis and representational politics and redefining (at least temporarily) the affective atmosphere of white racism that often kept African Americans in Deep South rural communities living in heightened fear and anxiety.

Conclusion

The Free Southern Theater is an essential link in the broader spadework of civil rights organizing and resistance to white supremacy. While the more general public and even many academics tend to focus attention on charismatic leaders and large marches, it was the hard and gritty work that went on in many small, rural towns in the Deep South that helped to lay the groundwork for a broader proliferation of freedom and civil and social rights during this era. Through its focus on grassroots education and the contestation of images of black life associated with anti-Black racism, the Free Theater is an example of the work the SNCC was engaged within many rural and small southern towns. Because of its focus on liberation and presenting a series of plays and images that countered stereotypical images of life in this region and the

theater was engaged in critical placemaking that countered racist and stereotypical images of black life in the region. The fight over images was important not only because it countered white supremacist representations of black life but also because it represents a politics of resistance that is important to work through. We continue to struggle against racism and racialization processes that dehumanize large sections of the US population.

Through placemaking, the Free Southern Theater provides a space of respite and recreation in which mostly poor working-class African Americans could escape from the realities of everyday life. As we argue, this is critical, if less well studied, aspect of civil rights organizing that is important to the broader processes of organizing. Recall from the previous section that an aspect of SNCCs approach was to take on the black box of community, to allow people to develop and see themselves as agents of their liberation. The sheer weight of white supremacism and the fight for survival coupled with the white supremacist propaganda campaigns meant that there was precious little time to sit back and reflect on the broader structure of power that created these conditions for many people. In providing a space for theatrical production, the Free Theater worked to create a space that gave working folks the space to decompress, and this was important to the broader process of consciousness-raising that was central to taking on white supremacism and the black box of community that constrained the political possibilities of liberation at the heart of SNCC's work.

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