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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The 1964 freedom schools as neglected chapter in Geography education

Derek H. Alderman [a], Bethany Craig [a], Joshua Inwood [b] and Shaundra Cunningham [a]

[a]Department of Geography, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA; [b]Department of Geography, University Park, Penn State, USA

ABSTRACT

Our paper revisits a neglected chapter in the history of geographic education–the civil rights organization SNCC and the Freedom Schools it helped establish in 1964. An alternative to Mississippi's racially segregated public schools, Freedom Schools addressed basic educational needs of Black children while also creating a curriculum to empower them to become active citizens against White supremacy. Emerging out of a history of Black fugitive learning, Freedom Schools produced a critical regional pedagogy to help students identify the geographic conditions and power structures behind their oppression in the South and use regional comparisons to raise their political consciousness and expand their relational sense of place. Freedom Schools have important implications for higher educators, especially as contemporary conservative leaders seek to rid critical discussions of race from classrooms. They offer an evocative case study of the spatial imagination of the Black Freedom Struggle while pushing us to interrogate the inherent contradictions, if not antagonisms, between public higher education and emancipatory teaching and learning. Freedom Schools prompt a rethinking and expansion of what counts as geographic learning, whose lives matter in our curriculum, where and for whom we teach, and what social work should pedagogy accomplish.

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Introduction

"Education should enable children to possess their own lives instead of living at the mercy of others."— *Charles Cobb, Jr., Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist*

As part of their grassroots civil rights organizing in the deep southeastern United States (also called the Deep South), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) established a series of Mississippi Freedom Schools in the summer of 1964. These schools served as volunteer sites for anti-racist learning for Black elementary and secondary students as well as some adults. The Freedom Schools were developed as part of the broader "Freedom Summer Project," an impressive array of voter registration, community development, and education campaigns sponsored by SNCC and other major civil rights organizations – constituting what historian J. Hale (2014, para 1)

CONTACT Derek H. Alderman dalderma@utk.edu Derek Alderman Department of Geography, University of Tennessee 1000 Philip Fuller Way 305 Burchfiel Geography Building, Knoxville, Tennessee, 37996-0925, USA

calls "the most significant demonstration of . . . [Black] political strength in the Civil Rights Movement." As radical sites of learning, Freedom Schools operated independent of state control and sought to compensate for the racially segregated and woefully underfunded public schools that miseducated Black young people (Sturkey, 2010). A major goal was to counter what SNCC organizer Bob Moses called the "sharecropper education" that so heavily damaged the self-image, critical consciousness, and civil rights of Black school aged children (Moses & Cobb, 2001). Nearly 2,500 Black students ultimately enrolled in 41 Freedom Schools, doubling SNCC's original estimates and hopes (Etienne, 2013).

Freedom Schools, although receiving far less attention than other activism during the Movement, revolutionized how students learned to be critical and politically active citizens in their own right, even as the community faced intimidation, retaliation, and violence from White supremacists (J. Hale, 2011). Freedom Schools focused on basic remedial education, literacy, and mathematical skills while also introducing students to Black history and literature. Perhaps most significantly, the curriculum empowered Black students to question and challenge the social and geographical forces behind their oppression (Etienne, 2013). Well before the rise of what we call "critical pedagogy" (Giroux, 1988), Freedom Schools recognized the power-laden nature of education, encouraged students to be dialogic agents in their own learning, and sought to catalyze civic engagement among young people. SNCC long focused on cultivating grassroots leadership and these schools were an important tool to advance this goal. Creating a supportive environment in which students could express themselves creatively, freely interrogate racist ideologies and discuss their own often ignored needs and experiences, Freedom School students honed skills in non-violent protest. Many participated in the struggle to integrate public spaces and businesses, organized demonstrations and boycotts, and canvassed communities to convince folks to register to vote (J. Hale, 2011; Sturkey, 2010).

Although lasting only six weeks, Freedom Schools proved transformative for a number of young Black Mississippians who later assumed leadership positions in their communities and developed a passion for education and activism (Etienne, 2013). SNCC's efforts inspired future Freedom Schools (most notably the Children's Defense Fund) to counteract detrimental aspects of traditional schooling and expand the sociopolitical possibilities of Black youth (Davis et al., 2021). Most recently, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones has launched the 1619 Freedom School, a free, after school literacy program in her hometown of Waterloo, Iowa to provide low-income students "liberating instruction centered on Black American history" (S. Taylor, 2021, para 3). In the over sixty years since their establishment, Freedom Schools "provide a civil rights model by which to evaluate the progress of educational reform initiatives implemented to provide a quality education for all students" (Hale, 2016, p. 33).

Despite their political and educational importance, the 1964 Freedom Schools have received scant attention from geographers and, in particular, geographic educators.[1] Meanwhile, educational historians have not fully acknowledged and discussed the role of geographic education within the revolutionary curriculum of Mississippi Freedom Schools. We seek to fill this void somewhat by arguing that Freedom Schools developed and leveraged a "critical regional pedagogy," although activists, teachers, and students at the time did not (and would not have to) describe their praxis in these terms. This

pedagogy departed from how many professional geographers studied regions at the time and long predated the teaching of social theory and justice in many of today's mainstream Geography classrooms. Freedom Schools treated regional knowledge as not just as a collection of facts, patterns, and interpretations, but as a tool in understanding and challenging the power relations undergirding the building of the Deep South as a racially oppressive region.

This regional pedagogy, like all Freedom School lessons, embraced ideas now foundational to the intersection of critical pedagogy and ethnic studies, such as centering the everyday struggles of students of color, providing curriculum that speak to those experiences, and empowering students to build critical literacies necessary for naming institutional racism and effecting social change (De Los Ríos et al., 2015). Freedom School curriculum sought to help students to identify the regional conditions and structures behind their oppression and use regional comparisons as a tool for raising political consciousness and expanding a relational sense of place and political agency. In doing so, students developed skills in interrogating the material landscapes of racial inequality and mapping the networks of social actors and institutions and scales of power driving White supremacy.

The regional education enacted at Freedom Schools was part of the wider geographical work and spatial imagination carried out by SNCC workers and mobilized communities. SNCC deployed conventional and unorthodox cartography, data collection and analysis, photography, theater, and the broader power of education to remake places and institutions to respond to the oppression of poor Black southerners (Inwood & Alderman, 2020, 2021). As part of its commitment to participatory democracy and community-based, grassroots approaches to racial equality, the civil rights organization was committed to understanding the Deep South. Freedom Schools – along with a host of SNCC activities and initiatives – stressed the production of a politically actionable Black geographic knowledge of racism and its effects on everyday life. Important for context, despite the fact that Freedom Schools were often staffed by White upper-middle class college student volunteers, the curriculum drew from a longer history of oppositional spatial knowledge making and fugitive learning central to Black southern life (Givens, 2021; Patel, 2016a). A tradition of educational resistance and self-determination in the face of oppression has existed within Black communities since the days of enslavement (Etienne, 2013).

This paper offers a geographic reading of the educational praxis at Mississippi Freedom Schools and discusses its implications for Geography higher education. Specifically, we analyze examples of the critical regional education found in its curriculum. For teachers in the United States and beyond, Freedom Schools offer an evocative case study of the Black geographic knowledge production behind the Civil Rights Movement, responding to recent calls to diversify Geography education and center Black lives and experiences. They also inspire us to make broader interventions in the civic efficacy and responsiveness of Geography curriculum with regard to the life struggles of historically marginalized students while pushing us to interrogate the inherent contradictions, if not antagonisms, between public higher education and emancipatory teaching and learning. Freedom Schools also offer an opportunity to address Black geographies of education and in particular fugitive learning, which remains underdeveloped in our field, and the leveraging of schools for civil rights, even as they have

been used (and are still used) to maintain racist structures and practices. Many of the Freedom Schools' goals still elude Black and Brown students as segregation continues to define many US educational systems (Hale, 2014; Jackson & Howard, 2014).

The Freedom Schools of 1964 Mississippi are crucial reminders of Bednarz's (2019) assertion that Geography education can and should play a greater role in citizenship education – a timely lesson as many public and private schools in the USA have become battlegrounds for debates about critical race theory. Yet, it is critical to recognize the kind of citizenship education to which we refer. Recent actions of conservative leaders and public groups have sought to rid critical discussions of race and civil rights from America's classrooms and thus produce a citizen able to ignore and deny the realities of racism (Mervosh & Heyward, 2021). Numerous U.S. states have enacted legislation that bans discussions, training, and/or academic material that forthrightly address discrimination – exactly the kind of discussions that Freedom Schools were committed to carrying out. Ray and Gibbons (2021) rightly see these laws as an obstacle to the kind of citizenship education necessary for building an equitable democracy.

Situating Mississippi freedom schools

Diversity, antiracism, and civil rights education

A study of SNCC's Mississippi Freedom Schools is of historical importance, providing an important grassroots counterpoint to conventional approaches to teaching the Civil Rights Movement as a series of campaigns planned by just a few national leaders.[2] For our purposes here, we situate the 1964 Freedom Schools movement within a geographical literature increasingly concerned with issues of diversity and social justice in the classroom. In a highly visible discussion, then-President of the American Association of Geographers Domosh (2015) challenged the discipline to consider "why the Geography curriculum is so white." She asks us to recognize the always incomplete, white-centric assumptions about geographic knowledge that characterize much of our curricula. She also encouraged geographers to create courses and teaching approaches "more relevant to today's racially diverse society" and to enhance the discipline's commitment to anti-racism and equality. Joining Domosh are growing calls for greater pedagogical engagement with historical and contemporary civil rights struggles. Inwood (2017) notes the dearth of Geography teaching focused upon the Black Freedom Struggle and the harm created by excluding Black lives from our classrooms. He argues that taking civil rights seriously not only enriches and diversifies our curriculum "but also … give[s] … students the intellectual tools necessary to take on white supremacist realities," which has seen a recent, alarming resurgence (Inwood, 2017, p. 456). Revisiting Freedom Schools allows us to explore the existence of an alternative Geography curriculum written explicitly to resist oppression, by people engaged in life and death struggles for equality. This provokes us to consider what a pedagogy looks like if devoted to viewing and interpreting the world through liberatory struggle. To help us unpack the implications of this struggle we turn to the field of Black geographies to understand the broad implications of SNCC Freedom curriculum.

Black geographies and fugitive learning

Black geographies is an important intellectual movement in the discipline, fueled by the work of scholars such as McKittrick (2011), Hawthorne (2019), Bledsoe and Wright (2019), Eaves (2020), Purifoy (2021), and Winston (2021). Proponents argue that by centering Black lives, spatial practices, and ways of knowing within our understandings of the foundation of society and space we can understand a deeper and more profound set of spatial practices. Importantly, Black geographies recognize that people of color have long engaged in the production and use of geographic knowledge to make a place within and against a White supremacist society. This geographic knowledge creation takes many forms, from the everyday to the spectacular and from artistic expressions to scientific constructs. Noting the limited integration of Black geographies into mainstream pedagogical spaces, Eaves (2020) laments the fact that "Black subjects and spaces have most often been rendered as mere data points on a map and measured in quantitative and environmentally deterministic ways." She suggests that Geography educators should move beyond just asking these questions of "where" or "how many" and prioritize understanding a Black sense of place on its own terms rather than "at the mercy of others." This statement harkens back to the sentiments of SNCC organizer Charles Cobb at the beginning of this paper. Doing justice to a Black sense of place is not about squeezing people of color into disciplinary and educational conventions, but expanding what counts as geographic learning, who creates and benefits from that learning, and what progressive social and political work geographic education should perform.

We follow Jarvis Givens' (2021) call for a "new grammar for Black education" as the United States' education system has historically been a site of both deep suffering and a sacred site of Black spirituality. While "the history of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples relative to white domination is marked by resistance, fugitivity, and creativity, these histories are themselves situated within the larger core vibrancy of Black, Brown, and Indigenous life" (Patel, 2016b, p. 83). The fight for freedom through Black education "was a fugitive project from its inception – outlawed and defined as a criminal act regarding the slave population in the southern states and, at times, too, an object of suspicion and violent resistance in the North" (Givens, 2021, p. 3). Fugitive learning moves beyond simply examining and broadening our educational approaches, practices, and settings and calls upon educators "to disrupt schooling through transformative dialogue, investigation, and action" (Navarro & Navarro, 2020, p. 159).

A fugitive pedagogy knows that Black education was about more than establishing traditional academic skill sets, but was "fundamentally [also] about challenging and transcending antiblack sentiments that structured the South and known world" (Givens, 2021, p. 159). In challenging their assigned roles in society, Black people as slaves and second-class citizens, fugitive pedagogy inspired "suspicion and refusal" and helped "students understand the urgent demand to make the world anew" (Givens, 2021, p. 230). As such, "fugitive learning should not be understood as a simple metaphor but rather as a historical and contemporary act of resistance" (Navarro & Navarro, 2020, p. 158).

The comments of Givens, Domosh, Inwood, and Eaves provoke us to reconsider what has traditionally counted as geographic knowledge and educational practice, both inside and outside of the classroom and when placed within the context of fugitive learning

open space to reconsider how we teach Geography. Critical within this push towards fugitive pedagogy is envisioning geographic knowledge production beyond the elite, often oppressive reach of state power or elite specialists – including professional geographers and Geography educators. An important avenue for fugitive learning practices is establishing ways of defining and doing Geography education beyond the traditional state-run classroom and exploring the formulation, teaching and learning of knowledge in alternative educational settings. Freedom Schools represent such settings, places created explicitly to leverage education in the service of antiracism and in ways that center a Black worldview.

Freedom schools as black geographies of education

At the heart of fugitive learning, and the Freedom School philosophy was a belief in resisting and developing a more just alternative to segregated public schools in 1960s Mississippi. Freedom Schools engaged in creating subaltern places of political education–transforming churches, backyards, community centers, and other meeting places in Black communities into schoolhouses. These education geographies, in the words of Logue (2008), were devoted to "radical conceptions of pedagogy, citizenship, and power" and had a decidedly different goal than that of state-run schools. Where state education sought to reproduce passive and demoralized Black communities, Freedom School curriculum fought to transform Black people individually and collectively into active participants in their own liberation. Freedom Schools have their origin in a long-standing and still ongoing Black recognition that education can never be separated from the politics of knowledge production and struggle for self-determination and racial justice. True to the idea of fugitive learning, this tradition of subversive Black education extends across time and space. The Mississippi Freedom Schools grew out of a number of fugitive learning movements, such as the conversion of antebellum slave cabins on plantations into clandestine classrooms and the Black demands for education in the Reconstruction era. Other important antecedents included the often-under-acknowledged work of Black principals and teachers in subverting inequality in segregated schools, Septima Clark's literacy and citizenship workshops for Black adults beginning in the 1950s, the training of grass roots activists at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and Black student activism on many university campuses (Kendi, 2012; Payne & Strickland, 2008).

We believe that revisiting Mississippi Freedom Schools is a valuable point of intervention in these aforementioned agendas of diversifying and exploring fugitive teaching and learning practices that advance Black Geographies of education. When SNCC field secretary Charles Cobb formally proposed establishing Freedom Schools in December of 1963, he articulated a project of resistant place making and the urgency of creating sites of learning that pushed back against White Supremacy's control of information, education, and life chances. Encouraging Black creativity, Cobb said: "If we are concerned about breaking the [racist] power structure, then we [Black communities] have to be concerned about building our own institutions to replace the old, unjust decadent ones which make up the existing power structure. Education in Mississippi is an institution which must be reconstructed from the ground up" (as cited in Chilcoat & Ligon, 1999, pp. 46–47).

Years later, Cobb (2008) would write of the critical role that Geography played in the Freedom Schools, the necessity of creating comfortable and safe spaces for Black students to express and explore ideas and build self-esteem consequential to the struggle for citizenship rights. Frequently populated with White volunteer teachers/facilitators from privileged backgrounds outside the South, Freedom Schools displayed their own racial and class tensions, and despite their revolutionary curriculum were largely silent on issues of gender and sexual equality. Yet, Mississippi's Freedom Schools strongly supported Black Mississippians in "collectively develop-[ing] a more realistic perception of U.S. society, themselves, the conditions of their oppression, and the conceptualization of alternatives to the prescribed [racist] social order" (Logue, 2008, p. 60).

The very organization and operation of Freedom Schools, as a Black Geography of education, modeled for students the possibilities of a liberatory, social order responsive to community needs and experiences. Methods of teaching and learning in Freedom Schools challenged the control at state-run Mississippi schools. Rather than centered on tests, memorization of facts, and maintaining discipline, Freedom Schools created a place where Black students could freely ask questions, not just about academics but especially about political events, the Civil Rights Movement, and the racist realities that shaped their lives (Etienne, 2013). According to Hale (2016, p. 113), "Instead of sitting passively in rows of desks with the teacher in the front of the room [as found in typical schoolrooms], students sat where they chose and in a way that facilitated open dialogue between teacher and student." There is a long tradition of discussion in education, but Freedom Schools saw it as key to creating a sense of equality and worth among otherwise disenfranchised students, challenging authority, and transforming learning into social action (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2001). Expression and resistance were also encouraged at Freedom Schools through students' publishing of newspapers, participating in theatrical productions, creative writing, singing, extracurricular activities, and of course protests and demonstrations (Hale, 2016).

The emphasis on discussion, dialogue, and questioning in Freedom Schools – while certainly emerging from wider ideas about progressive education (Logue, 2008) – also closely followed the participatory democratic approach of SNCC. SNCC organizers drew heavily from the Black community organizing teachings of Ella Baker. Baker helped found SNCC in 1960 and mentored many of its organizers to shun "top down" charismatic leadership for empowering communities to take charge of their own freedom struggles. Historian Ransby (2003) notes that Baker's approach to teaching and learning, traceable to her work with worker education projects of the 1930s, was the "governing ethos" of the Freedom Schools. Baker chaired the committee in charge of designing the Freedom Schools. The schools' pedagogy reflected Black feminist values she brought to SNCC, namely knowing and being accountable to the life situations of oppressed Black people. Focused on enabling communities to participate directly in discussions, debates, and decisions about social change, she positioned ordinary working people as central to the movement.

The geographical work of civil rights

Important to our discussion is that Freedom Schools engaged Black young people in critical fugitive learning about their own region to better understanding how the region was organized socially and politically. SNCC placed great value on using the production of information and education – often geographic in nature – as a mobilization tool. Well before SNCC field secretaries would enter communities in the Deep South, they would avail themselves of social and spatial data resources and current news about those communities' local economy, political and demographic profile, physical and cultural landscapes, and their broader regional, national, and even global interconnections (Inwood & Alderman, 2020). Volunteer teachers for Freedom Schools used similar geographic audits and analyses during their orientation training at the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio. Done partly for safety since so many of the volunteers had little background in the violent Jim Crow South it also ensured that teachers were responsive and respectful of student and community needs. On average, these volunteer teachers came from families earning nearly 50% more than the national average and almost eight times as much as the Mississippi families hosting them (Hale, 2016, p. 93).

For students enrolled in Freedom Schools there was a high premium placed on using information and education to raise the consciousness of Black southerners and challenge what SNCC worker Charles Sherrod called "the black box of community" (Inwood & Alderman, 2020). That black box referred to those spatial and social conditions of race and inequality that define one's place within communities. Confronting that black box and knowing one's community (and by extension one's region and nation) were central to oppressed groups not accepting the exploitation and inhumanity that structured their daily lives. While SNCC wanted to use Freedom Schools and other initiatives to dismantle the box of racism that enveloped communities, Mississippi's state-run schools sought to maintain this box tightly by curtailing academic freedom.

White public education officials in 1960s Mississippi created and enforced a curriculum that deliberately squashed Black students' discussions of citizenship rights and knowledge of African American historical and geographic contributions. "In the 1950s and 1960s [B]lack public school teachers were under constant surveillance, and discussing civil rights issues, even in all-[B]lack Mississippi schools, could lead to termination of employment" (Sturkey, 2010, p. 353). The intent was clear – to maintain racial control and keep Black youth, the future of any sustained Freedom Movement – apathetic, disengaged, and uninformed. Freedom School volunteer teachers saw how the lack of even the most basic geographic and historical education compromised SNCC's goal of participatory democracy. They wrote letters home about how some of their Black students "did not know how many states were in the union or the name of the nation's capital" and others "had never heard of the Supreme Court's 1954 school desegregation decision" (Sturkey, 2010, p. 354).

In sharp contrast, running throughout the Freedom School curriculum were several opportunities for students and their teachers to develop an explicitly anti-racist knowledge and understanding of the region and nation. This included mapping the uneven power relations that tried to set the terms of Black life, and the value of cross-regional comparative analysis. Our intent in the next section of this paper is to offer a critical reading of portions of the Freedom School's regionally oriented curriculum. The

expansion of spatial imagination and radical geographic literacy enacted through Freedom Schools, while seemingly new for the White-dominated disciplinary cultures of Geography and Geography education, has always existed. The fact that we may see it as unexpected and remarkable is testimony to how much, according to Hawthorne (2019, p. 1), Black innovations in space and place "have not always been recognized as 'properly' geographical and have thus been systematically excluded from the formal canon of disciplinary Geography." Undergirding our exploration of SNCC Freedom School curriculum is a wider contention that the work of producing, disseminating, and applying geographic knowledge in many conventional and unconventional forms played an important role not just in the American Civil Rights Movement but also throughout the entire Black Freedom Struggle. From the liberation from enslavement to the struggle against Jim Crow segregation and to the current fight against police brutality, Black communities have deployed spatial thinking and tools in self-determined ways (Alderman & Inwood, 2016).

Freedom curriculum case studies: radical pedagogy of regional analysis

To materialize Charles Cobb's vision of establishing Freedom Schools in Mississippi, SNCC established a Summer Educational Program Committee. The seven-person committee, under the co-leadership of Lois Chaffee, organized a two-day curriculum design conference held in New York City in March of 1964. Just a few months before the start of classes, the conference, under the chairship of Ella Baker, brought together national educators, civil rights activists, clergy, and others to formulate and write a curriculum to guide volunteer teachers, many of whom were pedagogically inexperienced (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1999). Perlstein (1990, p. 309) reports: "Remediation, science, and mathematics received some attention [from curriculum writers] and the conference developed a number of sample reading and writing lessons as well as more general pedagogical guidelines" for use in Freedom Schools. Yet, the focus of most participants fell on leadership development, including instruction in Black history, as part of creating a broader "citizenship curriculum."

Written largely by Boston community activist and former Harlem educator Noel Day and his wife Peggy Damon-Day, the citizenship curriculum was meant to help students "develop an awareness of themselves as social agents." The curriculum encouraged students to question "their life situations in terms of what they wanted their lives and communities to be and how they could work toward a more just and equitable existence" (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1999, p. 54). Important to the civic portion of the Freedom School curriculum was the creation of a series of case studies for focusing student discussion of the "political, economic, and social . . . forces at work in . . . [their] society" (as cited in Perlstein, 1990, p. 309). Although educational and civil rights historians and SNCC veterans have not previously discussed these case studies from a geographic education perspective, the lessons nonetheless encouraged Black students to develop a critical regional knowledge. Students worked with teachers to produce knowledge about the social and spatial conditions and structures of power at work in the Deep South, situating their own experiences within an understanding of struggles facing Black people. This curriculum empowered the relational sense of place and spatial imagination of Black youth through broader discussions of human rights. We argue that this spatial

imagination was critical to Freedom Schools' overarching goal of empowering oppressed communities, transforming the South's segregated society, and teaching students long-term skills that went beyond the classroom. The fugitive Geography education operationalized in Freedom Schools encouraged students to challenge their own understanding of the South while also considering the multiplicity of different, more just Souths that could exist as an alternative within the region.

To outline our argument we turn our attention to some case studies within the 1964 curriculum that demonstrates the radical pedagogy of geographic learning that took place within the Mississippi Freedom Schools. An important resource in understanding the lessons developed and taught in Freedom Schools is the online available work of Emery et al. (2004), who took on the significant labor of locating, assembling, and recreating Freedom School curriculum materials. According to them, gaining a complete picture of all that was taught in 1964 Mississippi is difficult, not just because of the vagaries of historic preservation but because Freedom Schools teachers could choose how to use provided curriculum units. Teachers sometimes wrote their own lessons, and SNCC openly encouraged them to improvise as they encouraged the curriculum to students' place-specific lives.

Identifying regional conditions and structures of oppression in the south

Critical to the geographic education found in Freedom Schools was the idea that there was not just one single objective reality that was the Southeastern US. Rather, the region functioned and felt differently, and hence constituted a different reality, depending upon who you were and your racial and class standing within southern society. One of the first curriculum units presented in Freedom Schools was "Comparison of Students' Realities with Others." It was intended to encourage students to develop a critical consciousness of the effects of racial inequality in their own lives by comparing their socio-economic status and well-being to that of Mississippi's White society. Freedom School organizers felt that identifying regional conditions of oppression, while at times difficult emotional labor, was essential to finding alternatives to the current racialized reality confronting students, and ultimately, defining new directions for action. Carrying out pedagogically this comparison and critique of regional realities allowed Freedom School students to understand how the organization of a White supremacist South was not just a passive setting but played a direct role in their oppression. By linking their stories (and that of their families and communities) with state and region level statistical data and wider interrogations of the South's material landscapes of racism, students were encouraged to discuss how their poverty and marginalization were strongly linked not only to their racial identity but also that identity as embedded within and shaped by living in the South (Emery et al., 2004, p. 195).

The fugitive learning at Freedom Schools heavily emphasized students creating alternative systems of public knowledge about the South that juxtaposed their regionally and racially based experiences of oppression and lack of opportunity against White claims that the South was modernizing and joining the national industrial economy. A curriculum case study available to Freedom School teachers and students to facilitate this discussion was an essay entitled "The South as an Underdeveloped Country." The case study encouraged student discussion of the South's economic history and

Geography and the state of regional development in the 1960s in a way that centered Black perspectives and lived realities. The lesson offered a detailed discussion likely not found in most state-run Mississippi classrooms at the time. It noted that much of the post-World War II development and progress in the South was uneven and in some cases non-existent for many marginalized and poor groups, especially the Black communities whose labors drove centuries of regional growth. Running through this curriculum unit was an idea made many years later by Clyde Woods (1998), who argued that racialized underdevelopment in the South did not simply happen, but resulted from a long-established monopoly of White power "arresting" the development opportunities of Black people – even as these oppressed communities found ways to survive.

Centering a data-informed understanding of racialized inequalities at work within Mississippi and the rural South, Freedom Schools explored 1960 US Census data with students. This included information showing that Black workers in Mississippi earned only 29% of the average income of Whites, as those who were employed by plantations were not covered by minimum wage laws. Census statistics drew attention to the fact that only one-third of housing units for Mississippi's Black communities could be classified as being in sound condition and not deteriorating or dilapidated. Over 75% of Black-owned or rented housing units in rural areas of the state had no piped water and over 90% of those homes had no indoor plumbing (Emery et al., 2004, p. 181). Always underlying these data examinations were students reflections on how their own families and communities fit into these regional patterns. The curriculum called on students to answer questions such as "Who works in your family? What kind of work does your father do? Your mother? Do they work for white people or for Negroes (sic)? . . . . Do they get paid a lot or a little? . . . . Do you think they could use more money? . . . .Why don't they get more money?" (Emery et al., 2004, p. 131).

In helping students explore and understand the conditions in the South that oppressed Black communities, Freedom Schools offered an innovative curriculum for uncovering the broader power structures embedded within Mississippi. Freedom schools did this by identifying the community decision-makers who perpetuate and profit from the discriminatory treatment of Black people. These same decision-makers were responsible for reproducing social myths that denied the power-laden realities of life in Mississippi and the harmful effects of racism. Drawing inspiration from SNCC's Research Department, the lesson prompts students to ask questions about White-vested interests in exploiting Black labor and how it affects the (un)realization of political rights:

> "Who makes money when Negroes are paid less than white people? Does the farmer make more money if the workers he hires are Negro? Why? Is it profitable for the farmer to keep Negro labor cheap? How does he do it? Do the myths help him do it? How? . . . Why does Northern industry come to Mississippi? They come from the North because Mississippi has cheaper labor and they can make more money . . . .Why don't white people want the Negro to vote? . . . The same farmer is able to pay Negroes less money than white people are paid because the state laws of Mississippi support segregation and inequality. Who makes these laws? How do they get their jobs? Who elects them? What would happen to these men and these laws if Negroes voted? (Emery et al., 2004, p. 137)

This Freedom School lesson asks students to unpack the "black box" of their community as connected to a wider Geography of economic and political power at work in Mississippi, the South, and even national industry.

Students were encouraged to locate the specific powerful decision-makers near where they live (mayor, big farmers, business owners, plant managers, mill owners, etc.) and determine the many connected and interlocking ways that these social agents worked with and influenced other power brokers to maintain White Supremacy. The Freedom School drew particular attention to the role that police, who have long brutalized and oppressed Black communities, play in helping the "farmer and businessman make money by enforcing the segregation laws." Later, students charted out what could be called a "power map" of the social and spatial connections and networks between institutions and powerful people undergirding the oppressive conditions at work in their own community. The Freedom School curriculum includes a sample chart as guidance. Students are encouraged to identify and discuss the common organizations, local and state government committees, and corporate boards that powerful decision-makers occupy together as well as how these relations are part of larger geographic scales of power stetching "from local towns and cities up to the highest levels of the national government" (Emery et al., 2004, p. 139).

A keen spatial sensitivity to the origins and effects of racialized power in shaping the South is evident in the fugitive learning at Freedom Schools. Students conducted critical readings of their community's landscapes and distribution of resources and were encouraged by their teachers to compare the segregated conditions of White and Black schools, White and Black housing, employment opportunities, and quality/accessibility to medical facilities. Students were not "taught" these differences or inequalities; rather, students through a series of questions drew their own conclusions, feelings, and reactions. As Perlstein (1990) observes, the Freedom School curriculum "encouraged [students] to see the characteristics of their environment as fundamentally political rather than merely physical" (p. 312). This interpretation of how social differences and inequalities become built into and reaffirmed through one's geographical surroundings is now a standard lesson in many Human Geography classrooms. And indeed, it was these struggles over social and spatial inequality during the Civil Rights Movement that helped form the Critical Geography we know today (Barnes and Sheppard 2019). Over a half century ago, SNCC and Freedom School organizers employed a pedagogy intent upon exposing and challenging the regional conditions, infrastructures, and power structures of racial oppression. In doing so, they answered a question of growing relevance to contemporary Geography educators – how can we design curriculum that centers the everyday experiences, needs, and well-being of students from historically marginalized groups?

Regional comparison for raising political consciousness and relational sense of place

Another key part of the geographic education contained within the Freedom School curriculum was the value placed on regional comparison and how the political education of Mississippi's Black youth depended upon seeing the South as part of a wider Geography of racial struggles and human rights. Of particular importance was understanding that racism was not something that was strictly southern and there was an efficacy or usefulness in students expanding their spatial imagination to frame alternatives to the status quo. For example, Freedom School organizers used the "North to Freedom?" curriculum unit to help students discuss race relations in the South versus the

North and then deploy those critical regional comparisons to become cognizant of what the Black migrant experience meant for escaping racial oppression. Crucially, the "North to Freedom?" curriculum sought: "To help the students see clearly the condition of the Negro in the North, and see that migration to the North is not a basic solution [against racism]" (Emery et al., 2004, p.132).

The curriculum responded to what was already a long established "Great Migration" of Black men, women, and families out of the South to secure more rights, greater job opportunities, better education systems, and equal access to healthcare in other regions of the US. The Freedom School lesson began with Geography: students were shown a map of the U.S. with the Southeast region shaded and then students would locate on the map many of the northern cities that were major destinations for migrating Black Mississippians. While the North was widely expressed as an escape route from the oppressive conditions of life in the Jim Crow South, the reality was more complicated. Racism in the North, while differentially situated, none-the-less worked to deny Black people rights and freedoms. Freedom Schools provoked questions about why students and their families felt Mississippi was intolerable and how those conditions became manifested in their own communities.

Freedom School teachers infused further meaning into the map lesson by showing students magazine pictures and statistical materials about northern ghettos. Those images became a jumping off point for student discussions about who in their family had relocated North, what life was like for them outside the South, and what social struggles continued. This included everything from overcrowded segregated housing and schools to high rates of infant death and race-based restrictions on jobs, income, and medical care. Problems of policing, White Supremacy, and internalized racism stretched beyond just the Mississippi Delta and the greater South. Because of the curriculum, students "began to see two things at once: that the North was not a real escape, and that the South was not some vague white monster doomed irrationally to crush them." Rather, racism is a systemic form of inequality with causes, impacts, and even vulnerabilities to change (Emery et al., 2004, p. 99). Within Freedom Schools, students began to articulate what was unjust both within and outside of their geographic region and how they could themselves lead and organize movements against these injustices.

To further explore the racialized realities found in northern states as well as the potential to learn from political mobilization in other regions, Freedom School teachers could use a suggested case study entitled "Chester, PA: Community Organization in the Other America." Chester, Pennsylvania in the 1960s was an industrial city where the Black working class felt the brunt of high unemployment rates and very low median income. Students were taken through the story of demonstrators using large public blockades and organizing Black neighborhoods to successfully protest poorly equipped and overcrowded schools and demand for "more jobs, better housing . . . better medical care, and an end to discrimination" (Emery et al., 2004, p. 218). Students discussed the goals, tactics, and strategies of the Chester movement, and the place- and social-specific differences inherent in carrying out a northern civil rights struggle, even as certain national commonalities existed in racial inequality and social mobilization strategies. The Chester case study centered on developing leadership, applied organizational techniques, and potential next steps in upending 300 years of oppression – all while creating a widespread belief among students that changes can be made (Emery et al., 2004, p. 211).

Making these cross-regional comparisons and connections–a critical form of spatial learning and analysis–were deemed important to SNCC Freedom Schools for understanding the wider relational Geography of racism and chipping away at what some Black communities saw as the insurmountable challenge of overcoming White Supremacy. Teachers were encouraged to facilitate student discussion about social life in other parts of the US and to think internationally and historically. Another curriculum case study available to Black students was "Nazi Germany Compared to the South." The purpose of the unit was to develop an understanding of the degrading effects of institutionalized persecution on the human psyche and the wider social, political, and geographic contexts of persecution beyond the Mississippi and the Deep South. Students engaged the history of Nazi Germany through maps, case studies, and inquiry-based discussion. The curriculum highlighted the parallels between Nazi Germany and certain features of the Black experience within the U.S. South, both historically and existing in 1964. In particular, the curriculum focused on the "parallel conditions of persecution" at work in both regions, eras, and repressive systems (Emery et al., 2004, p. 288). Freedom School teachers explored these parallels by presenting students with events from the Third Reich and asking them to draw comparisons to the institution of slavery, Black history and meaningful stories from their own personal histories.

Freedom Schools also used comparative analyses of Nazi Germany to reveal "certain universal tendencies in societies characterized by persecution of minority groups, [allowing] the student . . . [to] see that persecution and its debilitating effects on the victim cannot be limited to their own race, but can involve any group of people, depending on the particular historical conditions of a society" (Emery et al., 2004, p. 288). Students constructed their own critical spatial perspective as they began drawing comparisons between their own realities within the Mississippi Delta and other regions. Underlying this production of knowledge in Freedom Schools was an understanding that the struggles of Black youth in Mississippi were part of wider scales of civil and human rights struggles in the world. Geography educators today accomplish these goals by conducting regional comparison and finding lines of mutuality (shared feeling, action, or relationship), where students can expand their "relational sense of place" (Varró & Van Gorp, 2021). By exercising such relational thinking, Freedom School students could situate their own lives and Black senses of place within the commonalities, differences, and possibilities they saw in other regions, places, and eras.

Making regional and other spatial and historical comparisons and connections worked directly against the efforts of Mississippi's state-run education system to keep Black students uninformed of and alienated from the Movement and a wider critical (inter)national perspective. Such a goal remains highly important given ongoing efforts by authorities to curtail discussions of racism and civil rights in today's classrooms and that educators increasingly stress the role that geographic thinking should play in preparing critical, empowered, and conscious young people "attuned to social justice issues, and . . . [ready] to actively participate in civic life" (Bednarz, 2019, p. 526).

Implications for higher education

The Freedom Schools are not a static piece of American history but instead an innovative and essential intervention in U.S. education and curriculum development. To illustrate why, we focus on a debate that occurred in a special issue of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* focused on "New Approaches to the Geography of the United States." The issue, edited by Arch Gerlach, included pieces addressing geographic education and teaching and it was published in March 1964 at the same time SNCC was working to establish Freedom Schools in the Deep South. In the introduction, Gerlach declared:

> There have been many changes and improvements in the scope, content, and treatment of the Geography of the United States since the first compendious American Geography was prepared by Jebediah Morse in 1789 [. . .] There is a need for new methods of treatment as well as new content to match the progress of Geography toward a more scientific precision and closer integration with other disciplines. (Gerlach, 1964, p. 1)

The subsequent pieces argue that the study and teaching of Geography are undergoing significant and needed changes. A key theme of the articles focused on "debates about approaches to geographic understanding" (Berry, 1964, p. 4). These debates outlined the differences between "natural as opposed to human" references as well as "systematic versus regional; historical or developmental as contrasted with functional and organizational" approaches to knowledge generation and how these necessarily orient students in specific ways (ibid). Perhaps this is unsurprising given the intellectual focus of the discipline at the time, but when placed against the kind of curriculum SNCC was producing and the grassroots education movement it was engaged in, the juxtaposition explodes the staid and racist underpinnings of Geography at the time – lessons we argue are crucial for contemporary geographic education.

Ironically, the release of this issue of the *Annals* coincided with southern US Senators leading the longest filibuster in U.S. history against the 1964 U.S. Civil Rights Act, which represented perhaps the most fundamental reordering of space and place in America. Passage of the Act ended legal segregation across the United States, although this discrimination would continue in a de facto basis (Deskins Jr., 1981). As this debate took place, SNCC was in Mississippi creating course content that connected U.S. racism and segregation to broader regional and national analysis that explored the economic, political, and social connections between what Clyde Woods (1998) called the "plantation bloc" and the broader U.S. nation-state. As relevant today as they were in 1964, these issues were not only *not* on the radar of academic practitioners of Geography at the time, but their absence represents the kind of knowledge generation that has long underpinned exploitative power structures. Wright (2019) notes that professional scholars are trained traditionally to produce knowledge in ways secluded from the working-class masses, which does not serve the interests of liberation. For too long geographic education, especially in the USA context has existed within this vacuum.

Our examination of SNCC, Freedom Schools, and the curriculum they developed reflects the kind of organic intellectualism and true "public intellectualism" (Wright, 2019) at the heart of the struggle for equality. When there is pushback against teaching about race and racism both within the U.S. and internationally (Elzas, 2021), SNCC's work is a reminder that activists have been engaging in these struggles decades before "professional" academics. Freedom Schools can frame important decisions about

enhancing the civic efficacy of contemporary geographic education. Given the physical and social violence that Freedom School teachers, students, and communities faced in 1964, we in higher education are provoked to ask: *Will we remain silent in the face of the expansive white supremacist violences that now predominant?* Will our discussions in classrooms mirror the kind of apolitical curriculum that passed for geographic debate in the 1960s? Alternatively, will we use an understanding of Freedom Schools and the kind of liberatory pedagogy activists and organizers employed to rethink how we approach the study of Geography and the central role the making of space and region plays in the struggle for life and freedom.

A detailed discussion of Freedom Schools with university students offers a way of exploring the spatial imagination and alternative Geography knowledge production that always undergirded the Civil Rights Movement. Many popular memorial and pedagogical treatments of the Movement run the danger of "oversimplifying the sophisticated intellectual work and strategic planning of everyday activism" along with glossing over the oppressive conditions facing Black communities in the Deep South and the wider nation (Inwood & Alderman, 2020, p. 706). Using our university classrooms to examine Freedom Schools is key to building a civil rights pedagogy sensitive to the full range of practices and places involved in antiracist struggles – expanding how these struggles are understood in the past and the many ways they are enacted in the present. Gillespie (2021) illustrates this well in her discussion of the Black female-led citizenship schools of the 1950s and 1960s. She suggests that exploring Black geographies of education is a key conduit for recovering often overlooked activists and activism; how the politics of this activism flowed in different ways at different times and places (to different effects); and why education remains unfinished civil rights work.

Bringing the story of Freedom Schools and its fugitive learning into the higher education classroom does more than advance our understanding of the historical geography of civil rights struggles. It is also a robust moment for higher educators to rethink and expand what counts as geographic learning, whose lives matter in our curriculum, where and for whom do we teach, and what social and political work should pedagogy accomplish. The ongoing Black geographies turn represents many things, but it especially stresses that we must do a better job of questioning dominant white framings of the world and open ourselves to the alternative ways of knowing and living of communities of color – something that was a cornerstone of SNCC's educational resistance. McKittrick (2021, p. 3) describes Black geographies as knowledge focused around imagining the practice of liberation and involves drawing attention to groups and individuals and knowledge systems that reinvent the terms of Black life. Freedom Schools, beyond their immediate historical context in 1964 and its spatial context in Mississippi, is a case study in Black geographic knowledge production in the service of an epistemic justice, a recognition that antiracism requires a mobilization of information, communication, and the politics of knowing and truth telling. In this respect, the Freedom Schools open wider disciplinary spaces to rethink how our own current curriculum and pedagogical framings of Geography – even as they appear objective, institutionalized, or even progressive – reproduce the kinds of displacements and negative realities that Black geographies and Black liberation stand against. This needs to be a central lesson within the context of a Geography curriculum that remains unbearably white.

Another important implication for higher education drawn from the Freedom Schools is the wider goal of decentering traditional understandings of geographic knowledge and teaching at work in many of our classrooms. Mississippi in 1964 is an important touchstone in the larger ongoing institutional call for curriculum responsive to the social struggles of historically excluded groups and a mode of culturally relevant teaching based on the belief that "developing socio-political consciousness is equally as important as developing students academically" (Jackson & Howard, 2014, p. 158). The learning system deployed within Freedom Schools, which created dialogic spaces in which students questioned and reflected upon the social and spatial power conditions undergirding their lives and the lives of others within regions, states and communities, is indicative of the value that collaborative knowledge production can contribute to reforming Geography education. Given our responsibility to diversify and broaden participation in our field, Freedom School curriculum prompts us to question whether communities of color really see themselves, their worldviews and lived realities in what passes as standard university Geography instruction. How many of our textbooks or our university curricular modules argue for the kind of material reality that allows for life unencumbered by racism, settler colonialism, and other oppressions?

Freedom Schools push us to acknowledge "the history of anti-Blackness that is endemic to public education," including at colleges and universities, and the need to "counteract the deeply entrenched aspects of traditional schooling and cultivate dispositions toward more just futures" (Davis et al., 2021, pp. 2–3). Doing so provokes us to rethink our university classrooms as places of learning and subvert the dominant power relations and forms of inequality that characterize education (Heyman, 2001). We must also learn to recognize, honor and sustain the various spaces curated by and for Black people on campuses as they heal from and resist anti-Blackness (Warren & Coles, 2020). While reforming university spaces, curriculum, and practices is essential, it is also important for educators to interrogate the inherent contradictions, if not antagonisms, between state-run higher education, especially in PWIs (Primarily White Institutions), and emancipatory teaching and learning. The public university was institutionalized historically to advance settler colonialism and racial capitalism (Luke & Heynen, 2021) and its neo-liberal incarnation today appears committed more to entrepreneurialism than social justice (Baldwin, 2021). Despite lip service and even some more fully throated efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion, most universities have failed to come to terms with their historical and ongoing complicity in perpetuating racism and colonialization. From the perspective of many students of color, the notion of an inclusive multicultural campus is an "imaginary geography" (Harwood et al., 2018, p. 1245).

Inspired by Harney and Moten's (2013) idea of "the undercommons," which decries the exclusionary effects of the university's professionalization of knowledge and hierarchies of privilege, Greer (2018) highlights the "pathologizing encounters" that occur between "inclusive" administrative and academic structures and historically marginalized groups. According to her, meaningful inclusion is about supporting marginalized students, learning from their "intelligences of survival and activism" and bringing these "forms of study into conversation with curricula," but inclusion is also importantly about exposing, targeting and disabling the institutional practices and policies that create student disenfranchisement (Greer, 2018, p. 16). In this way, thinking about and through Freedom Schools invites a sober realization that colleges and universities must do more

than simply engage in culturally responsive teaching; rather, they must engage in a more fundamental remaking of place, institution, and power – not just in classrooms but across all spaces.

The success of Freedom Schools to operate independent of and in opposition to the state provokes us to consider expanding *where* we teach and extending our antiracist geographic education beyond the university's classrooms and market-driven missions. Kurtz (2019), for examples, discusses her participation in weekly teach-ins outside the formal university workplace and how that pedagogical work closely depended upon a knowledge produced by making connections with, assisting, and learning from diverse public groups rather than speaking for those groups. Inspired by the 1964 Freedom Schools, higher education geographers Willie Wright and Sage Ponder have collaborated with other educators, planners, and community organizers to form the Jackson People's School. It is a reading and discussion group held outside the control of a conservative Mississippi Department of Education to "deliberately train up Black teens in Jackson" on histories of human and civil rights struggles across the state and prepare them as future decision-makers of the city (Wright, 2022). As all of us assemble our teaching in new ways and locations, it is important for us to support and defend – in the face of growing government bans – a tradition of Black place making, fugitive learning and truth telling within our sites of education (broadly defined), administrative policies, and professional organizations as well through our collaborations with wider communities. Such efforts move beyond merely advancing an educational understanding of the world and instead pushes us to see the myriad ways our work as geographers intertwines with liberation or oppression. There is no greater lesson to be learned or praxis to be applied in our classrooms.

Notes

1. A search for "Freedom Schools" within articles published in the *Journal of Geography* and *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, two leading outlets for those specializing in educational practice and research, returns no results.
2. There is insufficient space here to carry out a full tracing of the development, operation, and impact of Freedom Schools, and readers are encouraged to consult the outstanding work of Hale (2016) and historians such as Sturkey (2010), K.Y. Taylor (2012), and Etienne (2013) for further background.

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ORCID

Derek H. Alderman http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5192-8103
Bethany Craig http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4676-3663
Joshua Inwood http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8291-5970
Shaundra Cunningham http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8576-2757

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