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## Transforming Geographies of Black Time: How the Free Southern Theater Used the Plantation for Civil Rights Activism

**Abstract** This essay examines the cultural and political work of the Free Southern Theater, specifically how this company used plantations, porches, and cotton fields in order to build a radical black southern theater in the civil rights movement. Staging plays like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* for black southern audiences, the theater challenged a violent structure of time at the heart of global modernity that I call *black patience*. By this I mean an abiding historical demand for black people to wait: whether in the hold of the slave ship, on the auction block, or for emancipation from slavery. Focusing on the centrality of the plantation to the spatializing logics of black patience, I consider how the Free Southern Theater used performance to demand "freedom now" and to revise the oppressive histories of time rooted in the material geographies of the US South. Mounting time-conscious plays, the theater used temporal aesthetics to transform the region's historical geographies of black time (e.g., the labor time of black slaves and sharecroppers working in cotton fields) into radical sites of black political action, aesthetic innovation, and embodied performance. Engaging and reinvesting the meanings of the South's plantation geographies, the theater revealed how one hundred years after emancipation, time remained essential to procuring the afterlives of slavery and colonialism and to shoring up the region's necropolitical attachments. Examining these aesthetic and political experiments illuminates the importance of time to the emerging field of black geographies and to the field of black studies more broadly.

**Keywords** black geographies, performance, US South, afterlives of slavery

In this essay, I examine the historical relationship between blackness and time and the role of this relation in the making of slavery and its afterlives. In the broadest sense, my ambition here is to urge a greater critical attention to time in black studies and social theory. More specifically, though, this essay is about how time has

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operated as a historical weapon of antiblack violence and a charged arena of necropolitical maneuver.<sup>1</sup> Unfurling the historical significance of time to the organizing of a world firmly rooted in antiblackness and white supremacy, it contributes to an area of critical inquiry literary theorist Saidiya Hartman (2007) has called “the afterlives of slavery.” On this front, Hartman explains, “If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (6). As Hartman points out, even in the wake of emancipation, descendants of enslaved Africans continue to navigate the ongoing perils of transatlantic slavery and their lingering effects on the nature of black being. Taking these instructive observations as a point of departure, I argue that time is a key variable in the “racial calculus” and “political arithmetic” that generate the afterlives of slavery—the “skewed life chances” of black being.<sup>2</sup> Further, I contend that even as the civil rights movement is widely celebrated for its commitment to the political logic of “freedom now,” we have yet to detail thoroughly how this radical time-based political ideology helped to revamp the racial timescapes of US democracy and to shape the aesthetic and political contours of global modernity. Put differently, the staple presence of this refrain has engendered a certain taken-for-grantedness that obscures the degree to which this radical grammar of the present—of the here and now—was pivotal to black people’s efforts to exist and imagine otherwise.

In the prologue to his 1967 novel *Sippi*, black writer and activist John Oliver Killens highlights the significance of race and time to the making of slavery and its afterlives. In the novel readers encounter Jesse Chaney, a black Mississippi sharecropper in his late fifties, in the throes of what can seem a curious performance of running. This act certainly puzzles Jesse’s longtime “friend,” plantation owner, and white employer, Charles Wakefield (Killens 1967: ix). “That black bastard is hauling,” Wakefield exclaims. “What in the hell was anybody doing running like that in all this God-forsaken heat[?] . . . Especially a poor-ass Negro? . . . Must be the devil chasing him” (ix). To Wakefield’s surprise, Jesse is hardly retreating from the “devil.” Rather, his

performance of running was sparked by the US Supreme Court's 1954 decision that found segregation in public schools unconstitutional and its provocative mandate for states to comply with "all deliberate speed" (*Brown v. Board of Education* 347 U.S. 483 [1954]).<sup>3</sup> Emboldened by the court's seemingly urgent investment in dismantling the spatial infrastructure of Jim Crowism, Jesse used the black body in performance to translate the court's time-space imperative into a radical act of civil rights protest. Abandoning his work "in the cotton field of . . . Wakefield's plantation," the sharecropper "didn't stop running till he reached the Big House more than a mile and a half away" (Killens 1967: vi). Opting to snub the racial protocol of entering through the back door, Jesse infiltrates the segregated space of the Wakefields' front porch, staging a courageous performance of protest that flouts the doctrines and decrees of racial-spatial segregation while worrying the structures of "racial time" that have historically shaped Mississippi's "plantation geographies" (McKittrick 2013: 4).<sup>4</sup> In other words, by untethering his body from the exploitative labor time of sharecropping, and then utilizing that body to mount a performative enactment of "all deliberate speed," Jesse stakes an embodied claim to a different time-space horizon: one that is both a saying and a doing of "freedom now," staged on the very grounds of a Mississippi plantation.

I begin with Killens's novel because it illuminates how, during the civil rights movement, black people used their bodies to challenge the conventions and constraints of racial time. More specifically, Jesse's performance of running unsettles a structure of racial-temporal violence I call *black patience*. By this I mean a racialized system of waiting that has historically produced and vitalized antiblackness and white supremacy by compelling black people to wait and to capitulate to the racialized terms and assumptions of these forced performances of waiting. Whether in the barracoon or the dungeon of the slave castle, in the hold of the slave ship or atop the auction block, whether waiting for emancipation or being cautioned to "go slow" in the pursuit of full citizenship, black patience was as pivotal to transatlantic slavery and colonialism as it remains to procuring their afterlives in the wake of emancipation.

And yet, black people have historically recast black patience as a tool of black political and ontological possibility. We can glean the significance of these radical rearticulations of black patience in Jesse's

performance of standing-in on the segregated porch of the Wakefield plantation house. Like scores of activists in the sit-in movement, Jesse's stand-in highlights the centrality of embodied stillness—a performative mode of black patience—to the choreographies of civil rights activism. Ultimately, this willingness to wait moves within the same economy of protest as Jesse's revolutionary performance of running. It is, in other words, a challenge to black patience qua black patience—a performative attempt to unsettle “the wait” in and through a radical performance of waiting.<sup>5</sup>

To more carefully consider these relationships between blackness and time, movement and stillness, politics and embodied performance, I turn here to the cultural and political work of the Free Southern Theater, a vibrant grassroots theater that emerged from the storied geographies of Mississippi. Founded in 1963, the Free Southern Theater was crucial to the cultural and political fronts of the civil rights movement. As the theater's more well-known and celebrated counterparts were marching, sitting-in, and using other modes of embodied performance to demand “freedom now,” the Free Southern Theater was likewise harnessing the power of bodies in performance to contest the structures of racial time invigorating the repeating violence of antiblackness and white supremacy. I argue that they did so in two primary ways. First, the theater's repertoire creatively exposed and critiqued the violent operations of black patience. Second, the materiality of the theater's productions—specifically, its symbolic settings—re-elaborated the violent histories of racial time archived in Mississippi's plantation geographies. From the fields in which black sharecroppers (like Jesse Chaney) worked at exhausting speeds to lynchings and segregation signs that were nothing other than demands for black patience, this assemblage of material relations between blackness and time fueled the economies and ecologies of plantation slavery and remains critical to contemporary schemes to foist the plantation form on black lives lived in the wake of slavery.

Killens's depiction of the Wakefield plantation house captures the lasting effects of slavery's singular violence. When staging his stand-in, Jesse positions his body under one of the four electric ceiling fans that had been installed in the plantation house. According to the narrator, “[e]ven before the Supreme Court decision,” Wakefield had come to the conclusion that “it was not slavery time anymore, and you

could not expect Negroes to pretend it was and stand around and do your fanning for you” (Killens 1967: viii). In addition to retrofitting the plantation house with modern cooling technologies, Wakefield had also added “all the modern amenities” (viii). In its material configuration, then, the Wakefield plantation house stands as a shining emblem of modern progress. Further, as the narrator notes, Wakefield’s wife is an avid reader of “modernistic novels” (x). Still, even in this context of high southern modernity, the very existence of the Wakefield plantation house, the sharecropping economy it supports, and the relations of racial violence it engenders reveal how almost a century after emancipation black life was still endangered by the brutal operations of slavery and its afterlives.

Like Jesse, the Free Southern Theater used embodied performance to articulate a powerful demand for “freedom now” and to revise the racial meanings of the South’s plantation geographies. Staging and repurposing plays like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1954)—often on the back porch of a shack or in a cotton field—the theater’s performances firmly critiqued the violent cultures of black patience while inviting black southerners to forge a new temporal relationship to the region’s plantation geographies. In the final analysis, my argument is threefold: (1) theater, like photography and television, was a key, if understudied, technology of civil rights activism; (2) the Free Southern Theater’s repertoire was keenly attuned to, and intervened in, the global history of blackness and time, and more specifically the racial project of black patience; and (3) the theater’s inspired transmutation of Mississippi’s plantation geographies into radical sites of performance illuminates time’s constitutive role in shaping the afterlives of slavery and thus the importance of time as a conceptual object in the emerging field of black geographies.<sup>6</sup> Focalizing the interconnection of race, time, performance, and geography, my argument therefore builds on Christina Sharpe’s idea of “living in the wake.” According to Sharpe (2016: 2), to live in the wake is to experience the “still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery.” But it is also to “resist, rupture, and disrupt” the threat of black death the aftermath continues to generate (13). This dynamic process of living in the wake—of navigating the “still unfolding aftermaths” of slavery—is evident in black people’s encounters with time in the wake of transatlantic slavery.<sup>7</sup>

**Black Time/Black Geography**

In 1964, when Free Southern actress Denise Nicholas arrived in Mississippi “alone and scared,” she felt as if she had “landed on another planet or stepped back in time” (Holsaert et al. 2010: 259). For Nicholas, Mississippi was an abject geography that existed outside the normative time-space of the modern world. This is likely what Free Southern Theater cofounder Doris Derby had in mind when declaring, “If theatre means anything anywhere, it certainly ought to mean something here [in Mississippi]!” (O’Neal 1968: 71). And there is no doubt that the state registered in this way for black singer and civil rights activist Nina Simone. In her now-classic civil rights anthem “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone sings: “Alabama’s gotten me so upset / Tennessee made me lose my rest / And everybody knows about Mississippi goddam” (Simone 1964). In Simone’s civil rights song, Mississippi emerges as the exceptional site of antiblack violence, what we might call the ur-scene of subjection (see Hartman 1997). Whereas Alabama and Tennessee are villainous geographies that leave Simone restless and “upset,” in the final analysis it is Mississippi that assumes the role of accursed titular character, of eponymous star, in Simone’s Deep South drama of antiblackness and white supremacy. These designations ultimately lend meaning to the song’s title and refrain, “Mississippi, Goddam.”

This paradigmatic rendering of Mississippi as a trope of racial violence has pervaded the global imagination. As the civil rights movement developed, the state became a vital element of political discourse and a touchstone in the global geopolitical imagination. Consider, for example, Malcolm X’s (1965: 90) claim that the United States should “get Mississippi straightened out before we worry about the Congo.” On yet another occasion, the leader argued that Mississippi is “anywhere south of the Canadian border” (Haley 1964: 479).

As Simone’s “Mississippi, Goddam” and Malcolm X’s remarks suggest, during the civil rights movement Mississippi was a well-trod metaphor and material referent for depicting the scale of antiblack violence plaguing the Jim Crow South and the US nation-state more broadly. In framing Mississippi as the ground zero of antiblack violence, Simone and Malcolm X gesture toward a wider structure of feeling that developed and thrived within the discursive process of

producing Mississippi as geographic fact. Rooted in a deep history of racial violence and a powerful set of ideological assumptions, this geography-based feeling has wrought Mississippi into a knowable and commonly known geographic being. As Simone puts it: “everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam.” Along these lines, we might usefully rearticulate Frantz Fanon’s (1952: 91) now-classic postulation, “Look, a Negro,” as “Look, Mississippi.” In this revised scene of hailing, fantasies of geographic otherness—and the structures of imaginative geography that produce them—form a compelling analogue for understanding how power and discourse collaborate to engender difference and, in this instance, to render Mississippi an unusually “abjected regional other” (Baker and Nelson 2001: 236).<sup>8</sup> In a word, this convergence of geography and semiotics, of power and epistemology, of repetition and the performative production of geographic being, has imbued Mississippi’s material geographies with ontological meaning: a mode of geographic being that epitomizes what it means to be “back in time.”

Here the insights of scholars working in the interdisciplinary field of time geography are instructive. As these scholars point out, the lived experience of time and space is crucial to the making of the social world, and it informs possibilities for being human. At the intersections of time and geography, we can glean the importance of time in defining Western conceptions of the human—and orchestrating transatlantic slavery and its afterlives. Zooming in on the temporal dimensions of physical environments, the time-geographic framework foregrounds “the conditions which space, time and environment impose on what the individual can do” (Thrift 1977: 4). For geographer Torsten Hägerstrand, widely credited as the architect of the time-geographic approach, the “life-paths” objects and humans take as they move from one point in space to another influence the experience of social life. But these paths or movements between “stations” are affected by “constraints,” which not only impede travel through space but also control and limit one’s ability to access stations. On this front, Hägerstrand outlines three categories of constraints: capability, coupling, and authority. Whereas capability constraints emphasize the limits biology might pose (e.g., one needs sleep), coupling constraints acknowledge “where, when, and for how long, the individual has to join other individuals, tools, and materials in order to produce, consume, and transact” (Hägerstrand 1970: 14). And, finally, authority

constraints account for those “domains” or “control areas” in which travels through time-space are regulated by law and social custom, for instance.

When considered through the valence of black life, each of these restrictions on movement through time-space is always already encumbered by the weight of an authority that finds its muscle in the production and preservation of racial difference and in the social transformation of that difference into uneven distributions of power and capital. When distilled to their most basic social operations, Hägerstrand’s categories of constraint for black people are inextricably linked to the proscriptions of racial authority. Taking the constraining capabilities of biology as an example, the possession of black flesh—more than a lack of sleep—is the most limiting biological constraint one encounters while navigating the social fiction of race and the “stations” this biologized fiction creates. To be sure, it would be a grave oversight to disregard how, under modernity’s extractive regimes of labor domination, sleep deprivation pressures and strains black lives. But it bears emphasizing that even sleep deprivation, a “capability constraint,” is at the same time also an authority constraint—one inseparable from, and indeed attributable to, the fact of blackness and the structures of racial authority that ground that fact in the material geographies of black flesh. We can say, then, that within the racial order of global modernity, black flesh is rendered a constraint that impinges on the time-space experiences and life paths of black people throughout the African diaspora.

In this regard, Mississippi’s material geographies serve as an illuminating case study. That is, the state’s social, political, and economic conditions have effectively established a prohibitive relationship between black people and Mississippi’s plantation geographies.<sup>9</sup> This affiliation between the geographies of black flesh and the material geographies of the US South is what Wakefield hoped to solidify in his hard-edged reminder to Jesse Chaney: “Nigger, don’t you know you’re in Mississippi?” (Killens 1967: xiii). And it is ultimately what Mississippi writer William Faulkner (1956) hoped to reinforce in warning black southerners to “go slow” (51) and to “wait” (52) in their pursuit of full citizenship.

All this considered, I would argue that Mississippi exists as a geographical instantiation of what performance theorist Robin Bernstein (2011: 11) has called a “scriptive thing.” According to Bernstein, material objects often contain a set of culturally specific “invitations” that

affect—or script—how individuals relate to a given object. Expanding Bernstein’s perceptive observations into the realm of Mississippi’s plantation geographies, I want to suggest that under the historical conditions of slavery and its afterlives, Mississippi’s physical landscapes have functioned as scriptive things. Conditioned by the state’s racialized modes of governmentality and the pillars of antiblackness that support them, Mississippi’s material geographies have historically been shaped by the laws and customs of racial-spatial segregation. These structures of spatial division have effectively prescribed relations between the land and those racial subjects who desire and pursue an encounter with the (geographical) object.

These relational dynamics among race, time, and geography were certainly alive when the Free Southern Theater pitched its tent in Mississippi in the thick of the civil rights movement. During a performance at Mississippi’s historically black Tougaloo College, these interconnections were apparent to Free Southern Theater actor Robert Costley. As the actor stood on the grounds of the campus—which were also the grounds of the Boddie cotton plantation—he was in awe of a tree rumored to be eight hundred years old. For Costley, the tree conjured up the ghostly presence of black slaves who had once lived on and worked the land under the excruciating rhythms of racial capitalism: “It stood straight and tall while hundreds of slaves bent under the lash. . . . As I stood sheltered by its great arms, in my mind’s eye a panorama of days long gone rushed by me and for a few moments I could hear the sound of the lash, the singing and crying of those in bondage.” This performance, he notes, was “the best yet” (quoted in Dent, Schechner, and Moses 1969: 81). Moreover, Costley’s encounter with the land signals the importance of Mississippi’s plantation geographies to the Free Southern Theater’s political visions, aesthetic preoccupations, and efforts to unsettle the violent cultures of black patience. It sheds light on the theater’s attempt to transform Mississippi into a radical geography of black freedom (Now!).

### **“They’ll Take Drama into the South”**

Motivated by a shared commitment to the movement, a mutual passion for theater, and a set of complex investments in the US South, when Doris Derby, Gilbert Moses, and John O’Neal founded the Free Southern Theater they added a new weapon—perhaps an unlikely

one—to the arsenal of civil rights activism in Mississippi: black theater. Like scores of college students and recent graduates, they embarked on a risky journey into the belly of the Jim Crow South, lending their time and bodies to the movement.<sup>10</sup> With scarce financial resources and theater accoutrements, in 1963 the founders transformed their dreams of a radical black southern theater into a fledgling but ambitious grassroots company that would eventually become the Free Southern Theater. In addition to drafting a “General Prospectus for the Establishment of a Free Southern Theater,” the founders began to recruit participants and to host workshops in the Tougaloo College playhouse (Free Southern Theater Papers, box 6, folder 12). Tougaloo was certainly an auspicious site for the Free Southern Theater to launch its operations. In addition to having a vibrant theater program and a rich legacy of civil rights activism, the college was also a private institution, which allowed it to exist—as one Free Southern Theater playbill put it—“outside the jurisdiction of the state legislature” (Free Southern Theater Papers, “Free Southern Theater Acting Brochure: Interested?” box 33, folder 2). Unlike its public peers, Tougaloo was not funded by the state government in Mississippi and was therefore relatively less vulnerable to the legislature’s habit of using its purse to suppress civil rights activism on college campuses.

In 1964 the Free Southern Theater began to solicit participation in its Summer Stock Repertory Theater, announcing calls for actors, dancers, singers, directors, technicians, designers, and “angels” (people with money). On this front, one of the theater’s brochures notes: “Checks should be made payable to Theater Project, Tougaloo College. We still need \$15,000” (Free Southern Theater Papers, “Free Southern Theater Acting Brochure: Interested?” box 33, folder 2). As the Free Southern Theater negotiated its own fiscal uncertainty, it recognized that black Mississippians’ financial resources were often as scarce as their own. Thus, the theater decided as a general practice to forgo fees for admission. The theater knew, too, that these financial realities would impact the nature of their stages and sites of performance. A far cry from the lush theater houses of Broadway, their stages, one brochure announced, would be the “community centers, schools, churches, and fields of rural Mississippi and of the South” (Free Southern Theater Papers, “Free Southern Theater Acting Brochure: Interested?” box 33, folder 2). Though influenced by economic constraints, these performance spaces reflected and embraced the

spatial realities of black southern life, while putting these plantation geographies in the service of radical performance. As I argue in this essay, the theater's considered and inventive approach to setting was as seminal to challenging the South's violent cultures of black patience as the radical aesthetics of time at the heart of the theater's repertoire. By examining these relations of theatrical production alongside the Free Southern Theater's temporal aesthetics, we gain a clearer sense of the histories of racial time (e.g., the time of black patience and the labor time of slavery and its afterlives) contained in the shacks, cotton fields, plantations, bombed freedom schools, and many other sites that composed Mississippi's plantation geographies. Transmuting these spaces of black abjection into staging grounds for its radical expressions of "freedom now," the Free Southern Theater used embodied performance to rewrite the histories of racial time archived in the land and to alter the normative time-space of Mississippi's material geographies.

The Free Southern Theater kicked off its pilot project by touring Martin Duberman's award-winning documentary play, *In White America* (1964). While the theater found *In White America* a "funny" choice—likely realizing the irony of inaugurating a black southern theater with a play by a white northern man—a key motivation for its decision was the play's thoughtful engagement with the long history of black patience. In this tenor, Denise Nicholas recalls that *In White America* "was such a profound experience." It enabled the audience to "see today's struggle as an *old* fight, and they recognized that people had been fighting much the same way, all over the country, for a long time: for *all the time*" (Moses et al. 1965: 68; emphasis mine). As Nicholas indicates, *In White America* offered a dramatic critique of black patience, providing theater members with an aesthetic instrument through which they could fashion a regionally specific critique of this global phenomenon, which, in their words, had left black people "suffer[ing] for recognition for three hundred years" (68).

Opening in the thick of the transatlantic slave trade and culminating with the civil rights movement, *In White America*'s vast temporal setting accrues epistemological importance insofar as it produces knowledge about slavery and its afterlives, about the limits of waiting in a world where the repetition of antiblack violence constantly subtends the flows of historical time. Therefore, the play's temporal setting exemplifies the transhistorical character of black patience, or the long

history of black people waiting in white America. On this front, the opening scene is telling. Set on January 12, 1964, the action begins when one of two characters named White Man retrieves a newspaper from a table. Reading the date aloud, White Man proclaims: "If God had intended the races to mix, he would have mixed them himself" (Duberman 1964: 2). In the wake of this provocative but all-too-familiar claim, other characters begin to chime in. A vital dimension of the dialogue that ensues pivots around the violent cultures of black patience. For instance, according to the other character named White Man, "Negro impatience can be readily understood." Just moments later, Negro Man adds: "After 400 years of barbaric treatment, the American Negro is fed up with the unmitigated hypocrisy of the white man" (4). When the curtain opens on *In White America*, then, audiences are faced with the dilemma of black patience and its origins in transatlantic slavery.

In this vein, the play makes an analeptic leap from 1964 to the transatlantic slave trade. Duberman culls this early segment of the script from the notes of a doctor who worked aboard a slave ship in the 1700s. Describing the interval prior to leaving the coast of Guinea to start "the middle passage," the doctor explains:

The slave ships lie a mile below the town, in Bonny River, off the coast of Guinea. . . . Scarce a day passes without some negroes being purchased and carried on board. . . . The wretched negroes are immediately fastened together, two and two, by handcuffs on their wrists and by irons riveted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks and placed in a space partitioned off for that purpose. They are frequently stowed so close as to admit of no other position than lying on their sides. Nor will the height between decks allow them to stand. (5)

The doctor's observations highlight the centrality of time and space to the making of transatlantic slavery. At the same time, they underscore the significance of the slave trade to the racialized production of time and space. In other words, during this inceptive phase of global modernity, the transatlantic slave trade persisted as a horrific venture in organizing black bodies' relationships to time and space and rooting that association in the time-space logics of black patience.

As *In White America* makes clear, the hold of the slave ship was critical to establishing and codifying these relations. With hands and legs

fettered by irons and cuffs, in the hold of the slave ship newly enslaved Africans were being primed to wait and suffer the restrictive spatialities that would come to characterize black people's experiences in the New World, whether in slave cabins or legally segregated schools. Moreover, that the doctor uses the diurnal cycle ("scarce a day passes") to relate these conditions of suffering underscores the everyday nature of the slave trade's extravagant violence, while gesturing toward a movement of natural time counterpoised to the slave's compulsion to remain still in the hold of the ship. In this way, the "relentless rhythm of the slave ships," much like the rhythms of time, stood in sharp contradistinction to the slave's compulsory stasis (Smallwood 2007: 7). These time-space conditions—that is, the forced stillness of black bodies within environments of rapid motion—inaugurated a paradigmatic relationship among black bodies, time, and space within the context of global modernity: a relationship that continues to thrive in the wake of slavery.

While *In White America* opens with images of black bodies waiting in the hold of the slave ship, it goes on to chronicle black people's centuries-long wait for emancipation and the entitlements of full US citizenship. Along these lines, in the play's final moments, audiences encounter a young black girl being taunted by a recalcitrant white mob, whose members avow with sharp venom: "No nigger bitch is going to get in our school. Drag her over to this tree! Let's take care of the nigger" (Duberman 1964: 66). The girl's offense: like Jesse Chaney, the Free Southern Theater, and scores of civil rights activists, she dared to take seriously the US Supreme Court's (prima facie) directive to alter the prevailing racial order of the US nation-state and to do so with "all deliberate speed."

Considered together, these scenes index the long history of black patience and highlight time's constitutive role in the making of transatlantic slavery and its afterlives. As the play reveals, one dimension of black patience entails the historical use of "the wait" as a mechanism for deferring and denying black freedom. Such oppressive manipulations of time are accompanied, nonetheless, by a powerful set of affective protocols that aim, in the final analysis, to produce "docile" black bodies.<sup>11</sup> Black patience is, then, not only about the wait, or deferral, or time, even. It is grounded also in a violent affective logic that strives to discipline black bodies through the strategic management of black affective expression. The *Oxford English Dictionary*

defines *patience* as a mode of “calm, self-possessed waiting,” an “uncomplaining endurance of pain.”<sup>12</sup> Situated at this intersection of time and affect, black patience is invested in coercing black bodies to wait but is, at the same time, concerned with the affective tenor of the wait and the implications of black people’s refusal to wait. To this end, the mob’s tempestuous outrage for the black girl stems not only from her refusal to wait but also from the mob’s perception of this refusal as a sign of black impudence and, therefore, an affective affront to the violent impositions of black patience.

As *In White America* shows through its depictions of “negro impatience,” during the civil rights movement black people were becoming increasingly averse to waiting. Armed with centuries of evidence that the deceptive logics of black patience—and its tactical uses of the future—ultimately fuel antiblackness and white supremacy, Negro Man and Negro Woman close the play with a vision of black life unencumbered by the strictures of black patience:

NEGRO WOMAN: We can’t wait any longer.

NEGRO MAN: *Now* is the time. (Duberman 1964: 68–69)

### Rescripting Mississippi’s Plantation Geographies

If the founders of the Free Southern Theater worked to invent aesthetic forms rooted in black southern culture, their settings were equally grounded in the South’s physical geographies and built environments and thus in the configurations of racial power these spatialities signified and reinforced. This was certainly true for the company’s 1964 performances of *In White America*. Throughout the opening season, productions were generally “simple—with a few lights and one platform” (Dent, Schechner, and Moses 1969: 17). And because the theater often used outdoor, afternoon settings, even these lights were sometimes unnecessary. This was the case at a Holmes County, Mississippi, performance, where audience members had come “from the farms” to attend a production of *In White America* but wanted to “get back home by dark” (63).

Such vibrant synergies between performance and geography, theater and environment, were also apparent at a lively production of *In White America* in the small town of Ruleville, Mississippi. The stage for this performance was the back porch of a shack, a space that

surely resonated with the theater's largely poor black southern audiences. Conjuring up memories of the slave cabin and signifying the stark economic inequalities black southerners have historically faced, the porch of a shack might seem an unlikely and even undesirable site of performance. But in reinvesting this historical spatiality, the Free Southern Theater creatively wove the architecture of black southern life into the setting of the live performance. In the US South, moreover, porches have historically functioned as a valuable arena for black cultural production and communal formation. In addition to serving as "stages for interactive storytelling" (Harris 1996: xii) or a "gallery seat" (Hurston 1979: 49) for watching the goings-on of a town, porches have also been critical to developing an "alert political community" (Davis 2011: 81), an outcome that was pivotal to the Free Southern Theater's founding vision. Seen from this vantage point, the back porch is something more than a makeshift stage. It exceeds the results of any calculus that would constrain its being to a material sign for black deprivation. In transforming the back porch of a shack into a radical site of performance, of black political participation and community engagement, the Free Southern Theater converted this historical site of inequality into a generative space of "radical openness" (hooks 1990: 145).<sup>13</sup> Thus, even as the porch continued to conjure up the specters of plantation slavery and to embody capitalism's uneven and racialized distribution of wealth, the social meanings and the ontology of the porch were transformed in the act of live performance, affording the porch, the shack, and black southern audiences alike another way of being in the world and of relating to Mississippi's traumatic plantation geographies.

If the stage for this performance was unconventional, the seating was as improvisational and attuned to the material geographies of the US South. In fact, audience members not only sat on cots, benches, and folding chairs but some even watched the production while sitting on the ground. Here I want to linger for a moment on this seemingly benign but supremely evocative performance of *sitting on the ground*. To sit on the ground in this instance—whether sitting on a bench, a cot, or directly on the land—is to stage a haptic encounter between black southern bodies and southern land, to gather the signs and histories of these material geographies into an important relational proximity, one that disturbs the historically violent relationship between black-south bodies and Mississippi's plantation geographies.<sup>14</sup>

According to philosopher Bruno Latour (1993: 82), “History is no longer simply the history of people, it becomes the history of natural things as well.” Extending Latour’s thinking to Mississippi’s plantation geographies, I am interested in the histories of antiblack violence and, more specifically, the histories of racial time enfolded in the material geographies of the US South. Here I want to zoom in on a key dimension of this particular history of the natural thing, one that exposes the role of race and time in that historicity: that is, the laboring black body within the South’s plantation economy.

Under the brutal conditions of slavery, sharecropping, the chain gang, and other racialized regimes of labor domination, the black-south body has consistently been forced to work quickly—to move to the crushing clock of racial capitalism. Theorizing what he calls “clock-regulated slave labor,” historian Mark M. Smith (1997: 2) explains that the clock became “the planters’ weapon of choice in their ongoing battle with their chattel” (5). In this sense, clock time operates as a modern “weapon” of antiblack violence; it hardens the master-slave binary while fortifying the dynamics of racial power that define this relation. When seen from this perspective, “all deliberate speed” is better regarded as a guiding principle of black labor exploitation than juridical liberal-democratic intervention into the United States’ racialized politics of time and space. What I am suggesting is that Mississippi’s material geographies are key repositories for racialized histories of time and the lived experiences of black-south bodies that have been forced to work and move to the extractive rhythms of racial capitalism—to the tempos of slavery and its afterlives. Therefore, we might amend Latour’s claim to emphasize how in the context of plantation slavery the history of people is always a history of natural things, and the history of natural things is always a history of people.

And yet, it is my contention that the act of sitting on the ground during the Free Southern Theater’s performances unsettled these historical entanglements of race, time, and geography. In this suggestive convergence of dark matter—of dark southern soil and black southern flesh—the subject who sits on the ground rubs up against and revamps the racial histories of time archived in Mississippi’s plantation geographies.<sup>15</sup> To put a finer point on this claim, though occupying grounds beleaguered by oppressive histories of racial time, the moment of live performance enabled black southern audiences to inhabit and enjoy what I term the *time of black leisure*.

Considered alongside histories of slavery and colonialism and their substantive constraints on possibilities for black leisure, the willful act of sitting on the ground to experience a play is a meaningful and politically significant form of leisure that troubles and recasts the racial project of black patience.<sup>16</sup> In this moment of live performance, the audience suspends labor, body, and reality to linger in the theater's imaginative flights. Like the performance of sitting-in at a lunch counter, sitting on the ground was a radical reinterpretation of black patience. This exercise in waiting and deferral creatively reinvested the wait. In a labor economy that overrepresented black Mississippians in jobs that required long hours and physically exhausting work (like sharecropping), time was a valuable resource. Thus, attending a Free Southern Theater performance meant that laundry was deferred. Cooking had to wait. Managing the garden was delayed. Unsettling the historical aversion to black bodies in leisure, audiences staged an embodied intervention into the time-space of the South's plantation geographies, the clock time of racial capitalism, and the repeating temporalities of slavery and its afterlives. Black southerners' attendance at these performances, then, were willful uses of black time.

According to Walter D. Mignolo (2002: 67), since the Renaissance "time has functioned as a principle of order that increasingly subordinates places, relegating them to before or below from the perspective of the holders of time." I would add that time likewise subordinates people. The designation "holders of time," then, names a historical contingent of power holders that routinely manipulate time as a way of dominating places and people, landscapes and flesh. For these "holders of time"—Wakefield and Faulkner among them—time operates as a resource of social power and, in this instance, impacts racial formation and the structures of racial power this process engenders. However, in sitting on the ground for the theater's performances, black southern audiences managed to become "holders of time."

To be sure, the performance of black leisure does not wholly disassemble the violent infrastructure of racial time or the sturdy mechanisms of antiblackness. On this front, we might recall the Holmes County, Mississippi, performance where the audience expressed desires to "get back home by dark." For many of them, this wish to return home before "dark" was likely rooted in having to begin the taxing work of sharecropping early the next morning or, worse, in being conscious of the imminent threats of racial violence that routinely

surfaced in the dark. This threat was heightened on the heels of attending the Free Southern Theater's performances. Thus, in the hours following *In White America*, the grounds of black leisure would soon become a theater of black labor exploitation and quite possibly a stage for murder.

Acknowledging this connection between black death and Mississippi's plantation geographies, noted civil rights activist, sharecropper, and Free Southern Theater audience member Fannie Lou Hamer (2011: 58) dubbed Sunflower County "the land of the tree and the home of the grave." As the Free Southern Theater would learn, Hamer's adage was as true for other regions in Mississippi as it was for Ruleville or any other town in Sunflower County. The theater gained a clearer sense of this stark reality when civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were murdered and found buried ("home of the grave") near a Mississippi dam. Not only did the theater cancel its performance on August 7, 1964, to observe the slain activists, but it added a section to its production of *In White America* that wove these murders into the plot. Following a performance in Beulah, Mississippi, the company was again reminded of the dangers animating Mississippi's plantation geographies. Here an interracial coterie of Free Southern Theater actors was forced to the local police station and bombarded with questions like: "What are you doing down here, Pretty Boy?"; "How is that black pussy?"; and "How does it feel to screw a white woman?" Finally releasing the group at approximately 2 a.m., the police alerted the Ku Klux Klan that "two nigger lovers and a nigger were loose" — "so pick them up for us." For three hours, the actors endured "abject terror," crawling along country roads, hiding in weeds, dodging the beams of the Ku Klux Klan's flashlights (Dent, Schechner, and Moses 1969: 86). Like hundreds of other activists who put their bodies on the line for the movement, these actors endured violence, terror, and imprisonment for performing in the drama of civil rights activism. Their stages and performances, however, are practically invisible in conventional histories and memories of the movement. By some act of fate, the actors managed to elude physical harm, though not without a visceral reminder of the dangers haunting the plantation geographies the Free Southern Theater had chosen as a site of performance and a radical stage of civil rights activism.

When the theater staged *In White America* in Milestone, Mississippi, the community center hosting the production was missing its walls, and the stage stretched out into a cotton field. Like the porch, fields were a staple site of performance for the theater. This was especially the case for its productions of Ossie Davis's 1961 satiric comedy, *Purlie Victorious*. Like *In White America*, *Purlie*'s temporal and spatial settings are key to understanding the transhistorical workings of black patience, the time-space of geographical matter, and their relationships to the afterlives of slavery. The place, the script notes, is the "cotton plantation country of the *Old South*," while the time is "the *recent past*." Further, most of the action takes place within "an *anti-quoted*, run-down farmhouse," while stage props like "an old dresser" likewise evoke and create a setting in which the past lingers (Davis 1961: 5; emphasis mine). As the plot develops, the temporal setting "recent past" comes to highlight the proximities between slavery and its afterlives nearly a century after emancipation.

The first actor whom the audience meets is the eponymous protagonist, Purlie Judson, who later renames himself Purlie Victorious. "Tall, *restless*, and commanding," Purlie is "consumed with . . . *divine impatience*" (5–6; emphasis mine), a relationship to racial time that recalls the "Negro impatience" at the center of *In White America* (Duberman 1964: 4). Davis's stage directions, then, attach to Purlie's character an aversion to waiting, signaling his staunch resistance to the violent enclosures of black patience. Set in fictional Cotchipee County in the "cotton plantation country" of Georgia, *Purlie Victorious* bears a striking resemblance to Killens's *'Sippi*. In both works, the plantation form continues to structure society in the wake of plantation slavery. Moreover, both works spotlight sharecropping as an especially brutal form of slavery's afterlives. Whereas Charles Wakefield was the boss of Wakefield County in *'Sippi*, in Davis's play Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee is similarly the master of Cotchipee County. "You see that big white house, perched on top that hill with them two windows looking right down at us like two eyeballs?" Purlie asks. "That's where Ol' Cap'n lives." "And that ain't all," he continues. "Hill and dale, field and farm, truck and tractor, horse and mule, bird and bee and bush and tree—and cotton!—cotton by bole and by bale—every bit o' cotton you see in this county!—Everything and everybody he owns!" (Davis 1961: 9). That nearly the entirety of Cotchipee County's material geographies is owned and controlled by one man is striking. Even

more shocking is Purlie's claim that Cotchipee owns "everybody." During a postslavery moment in which trafficking in human bodies was outlawed, such a statement might seem hyperbolic. But one cannot ignore the ruses of power and the tricky calculus that kept scores of black sharecroppers indebted to landlords, and thus confined to peonage, well into the middle of the twentieth century. As Purlie so aptly puts it: "The longer you work . . . the more you owe at the commissary; and if you don't pay up, you can't leave" (8–9). These conditions of entrapment worry any neat division between slavery and freedom. And they illuminate how such violent suspensions of black people in time and space ("the longer you work . . . you can't leave") endure across the time-space of modernity to (re)produce the South's plantation geographies.

So grim and heavy were these conditions, they prompted Purlie's decision to migrate from Georgia twenty years prior. However, the lure of reclaiming Big Bethel—a historical black church that was pilfered by Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee—inspired his return. On the heels of Purlie's failure to recover Big Bethel, Charlie, Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee's liberal-leaning son and civil rights sympathizer, registers the deed to Big Bethel in the name Purlie Victorious Judson. Disrupting the patrilineal lines of inheritance that nourish the afterlives of slavery, Charlie's act of betrayal dealt a lethal blow to his father. On the one hand, Cotchipee's death could signal a vanishing of the South's plantation geographies; an incipient dismantling of the "big white house" and the plantation society it represented and struggled to preserve. According to Purlie's brother, Gitlow, however, Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee was "the first man [he] ever seen in all this world to drop dead standing up" (80). That Cotchipee dies while standing up hints at the possibility of a resurrection—the prospect of a renewal that would breathe new life into the South's plantation geographies and thus into the afterlives of slavery.

With its fusion of political awareness, black sermonic aesthetics, slapstick comedy, gospel music, and a setting that was intimately familiar for black southerners, *Purlie Victorious* was a hit among Free Southern Theater audiences. In the words of Gilbert Moses, *Purlie* "laid the audience in the aisles with laughter" (Dent, Schechner, and Moses 1969: 52–53). As was often the case, the Free Southern Theater found itself performing *Purlie* outdoors in makeshift theaters. This decision was sometimes not by choice but made out of necessity

when the original site of performance was eviscerated by violent acts of white terror. These acts were nothing less than savage demands for black patience. In a 1964 letter to its New York fundraising committee, the Free Southern Theater writes of one such instance:

Last month in Indianola we gave an outside performance of PURLIE VICTORIOUS. We set up our playing area on a field next to the Indianola Freedom School which had recently been condemned by city officials due to a fire which had “mysteriously” broken out in the building. COFO workers say that firemen watched the building burn, and that after finally deciding to put the fire out, they destroyed a lot of equipment in the building with water hoses and axes. (55)

This mysterious destruction of the freedom school creates another scenario in which material spaces, like the cotton field and the shack, help to reinforce and sustain the afterlives of slavery. The destruction and subsequent condemning of this freedom school—cum—radical site of performance was a material injunction for black people to wait—a vicious reminder for them to adhere to the violent protocols of black patience.

Still, the Free Southern Theater transformed this scene of racial terror into a site of empowering, comedic performance. In its letter to the fundraising committee, the theater notes that the outdoor setting was “especially appropriate for the character Gitlow who . . . literally ran on stage from the cotton field spewing cotton from his pockets” (55). Recalling this particular performance, Denise Nicholas (2010: 263) writes: “In one town we performed the play right next to a cotton field. There’s a scene where a character comes running through the rows of cotton pitching cotton bolls into the air. It was real cotton.” She goes on to note that the theater, and “Purlie in particular, allowed for another way of venting—through comedy—and people loved it. They laughed and laughed.” Not only does this performance revamp the meaning of the cotton field by challenging the “exchange-value/use-value binary” (McInnis 2016: 74). But this access to laughter and political awareness afforded by sitting on the ground rubbed up against and unsettled the exploitative histories of black time etched into the cotton fields and cotton bolls that served as stage and prop for the theater’s performances.<sup>17</sup> Recalling civil rights protests that used embodied performance to revamp the meanings of buses, segregated lunch counters, streets, and other dimensions of the South’s plantation

geographies, the Free Southern Theater's performances posed a similar challenge to the region's orthodox conceptions of how black people could relate to the South's plantation geographies. Like these more celebrated and carefully documented geographies of civil rights activism, the theater's performances imbued Mississippi's plantations, cotton fields, porches, and shacks with new meaning and radical possibility. Further, as the theater used performance to demand freedom now, its audiences' own acts of sitting on the ground transformed the wait into an instrument of black leisure and black political possibility, thereby redirecting normative relationships between black bodies and the time-space of Mississippi's plantation geographies. These efforts mark a creative intervention into the violent cultures of black patience while, at the same time, showing how such radical rearticulations of black patience have been central to the grammars of black political protest. This is the making of revolution. It is a sitting, a laughing, and a practice of *communitas* that move over and against modernity's historical regulation of black leisure—and more broadly of black time.

#### **"They Are Waiting for Godot in Mississippi, Too"**

As I move toward closing this essay, I want to pivot to what was perhaps the Free Southern Theater's most explicit engagement with black patience: its production of Samuel Beckett's 1954 classic, *Waiting for Godot*. The time-conscious dynamics of Beckett's plot accorded with and underscored the game of waiting for full citizenship black southerners had been playing for more than a century. As many of us will remember, the central conceit of *Waiting for Godot* is that Vladimir and Estragon, Beckett's two campy protagonists, are trapped in a cycle of waiting for the arrival of one Godot:

ESTRAGON: He should be here.

VLADIMIR: He didn't say for sure he'd come.

ESTRAGON: We'll come back tomorrow.

VLADIMIR: And then the day after tomorrow.

ESTRAGON: Possibly.

VLADIMIR: And so on. (Beckett 1954: 6)

Interestingly, the duo is anticipating the arrival of a person who has made no promises to come. But even in the face of their uncertainties

about his impending arrival, they agree to return “tomorrow . . . [a]nd then the day after tomorrow . . . [a]nd so on,” entering a seemingly interminable cycle of patience that holds no guarantees for Godot’s arrival.

The Free Southern Theater’s production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* baffled and even bored some of the theater’s audiences. Penny Hartzell, a Free Southern Theater actor, notes in her journal that *Godot* “mystified, amused, bored, [and] shocked” many of those who experienced the play (Dent, Schechner, and Moses 1969: 53). In fact, some audience members registered their dissatisfaction by walking out before the play ended. And at a performance in Greenville, Mississippi, a group of children even threw spitballs at the stage. Paying attention to these disapproving acts of audience reception illuminates how the practice of reinvesting black patience through sitting on the ground did not unfold without nuance and complexity. Whether leaving a performance early or throwing spitballs at the stage, these responses index how audiences sometimes grew impatient with the Free Southern Theater’s critiques of black patience. Further, this willful decision to use one’s time as one wishes is as much a temporal claim of authority over the self as an act of sitting on the ground to enjoy a Free Southern Theater performance and the time of black leisure.

For many members of the theater’s black southern audiences, Estragon and Vladimir’s fruitless patience symbolized how the US nation-state manipulated time to defer black people’s access to full citizenship. The play’s larger themes of waiting, violence, and power were certainly not lost on Fannie Lou Hamer. At a 1964 Ruleville performance of *Godot*, Hamer (2011: 53) exclaimed: “You can’t sit around waiting. . . . Ain’t nobody going to bring you nothing. You got to get up and fight for what you want. Some people are sitting around waiting for somebody to bring in freedom just like these men [Vladimir and Estragon] are sitting here. Waiting for Godot.” Echoing these sentiments in a talk that followed on the heels of this performance, Hamer urged the nearly all-black audience to “pay strict attention to the play because it’s due to waiting that the Negro is as far behind as he is” (53). This forceful rejection of black patience accords with Vladimir’s call to action in the play’s final moments: “Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! [*Pause. Vehemently.*] Let us do something, while we have the chance! . . . Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!” (Beckett 1954: 70).

As this essay has demonstrated, the temporal aesthetics of plays like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* exposed and critiqued the project of black patience. At the same time, this essay has demonstrated how the Free Southern Theater was engaged in a radical new materialist project, namely, its relations of theatrical production, and more specifically, its innovative use of setting. If, as new materialist thinking has posited, matter "matters," Mississippi's plantation geographies are forms of geographic matter that have historically been as open to processes of racialization and performativity as human identity itself (Ahmed 2010: 234). Thus, in making the back porches of shacks, cotton fields, and former plantations some of its primary sites of performance, the Free Southern Theater embraced performance geographies that were teeming with histories of antiblack violence. The theater adopted stages chock-full of ontological meaning. It planted roots in grounds that had long "scripted" the ways black people could inhabit these restrictive spatialities. Time, as we have seen, is vital to producing and preserving these racially uneven geographies.

As Vladimir and Estragon ponder whether Godot actually intends to come, Vladimir begins to "look wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape" (Beckett 1954: 7). In this gesture of "looking" at the landscape, Vladimir searches, in effect, for a history of time in the land. Such a performance of looking for time in the grounds of Mississippi's plantation geographies reveals histories of blackness and time that are firmly rooted in the violences of plantation slavery and its afterlives. It illuminates black southern futures that are as uncertain and precarious as the futures of Beckett's protagonists. It would illuminate how the conventional "holders of time" have historically forced black people—whether slaves, sharecroppers, or members of the chain gang—to work southern geographies with "all deliberate speed," while being ordered to go slow in their historical fights for full citizenship. This temporal paradox between the quick time of black labor and the slow time of black freedom was a driving force of slavery and continues to shape the racial order of the modern world. The Free Southern Theater's critique of black patience and its radical engagements with the histories of black time stored in Mississippi's plantation geographies were pivotal to the civil rights movement's campaigns to curate new materialisms, to engender new political possibilities, and to cultivate new modes of sociality that were grounded in the revolutionary demand for "freedom now." Using theater to unsettle the racial project

of black patience, the Free Southern Theater altered the violent enclosures of racial time that continue to energize the still-unfolding aftermath of slavery in the postemancipation and postcolonial presents.

### **Postscript: Toward a Theory of Afropresentism**

In mounting exhilarating, sometimes confusing, but always community-centered performances, the Free Southern Theater furnished a cultural conduit through which black southerners could challenge the historical regime of black patience and inhabit a radical structure of black time I want to term *Afropresentism*. By this I mean a political, affective, and philosophical orientation toward enjoying and demanding the “good life” in the here and now, in the present. As the performances in this essay have demonstrated, rather than capitulating to the violent impositions of black patience, black people have routinely engineered a range of creative strategies to enjoy the affordances of the good life by unlocking the latent possibilities of the here and now. Excavating the radical potential of the present, these engagements with, and experiences in, the Afropresent both critique and refuse the West’s wily attempts to quarantine black people’s access to the good life to an always arriving, and often unarrivable, black future. Seen from this vantage point, Afrofuturism is less a future-oriented practice of black freedom and self-making and more a tactical form of delay and a racialized experiment in duration. As I have tried to show, white supremacy has routinely claimed the future as a wheelhouse for manufacturing deceptive tools of delay that ultimately advance the cause of white supremacy.

Recent scholarship in Afropessimist thought has emphasized these transhistorical continuities of racial violence and has mapped their lasting impact on black being and on the structural conditions of the modern world. As the examples in this essay demonstrate, far from a cure-all for the violences of black patience, or antiblackness more generally, Afropresentism is instead about seizing and enjoying the good life in the here and now, knowing that in the context of antiblackness the future is always a zone of precarity, as Afropessimist thinking reminds us. And yet, access to a different way of being in the world—however fleeting—puts pressure on prescriptions for black racial being that take teleology’s force of finality, or white supremacy’s violence, as their chief grounds of critical imagination.

In the physical act of sitting on the ground, these relational tensions among black pasts, black presents, and black futures are dramatized in and through the black body's communion with the land and the differential histories of time—the time of slavery and racial capitalism, the time of black leisure and black aesthetics, the time of black political discourse—this communing assembles and allows. In other words, when black southern audiences sat on the ground to experience the Free Southern Theater's performances, the exploitative quick time of black labor stored in the geographies of southern land and black-south bodies converged with the time of black patience, black leisure, and the play's radical temporal aesthetics to create a multilayered assemblage of time. This fraught palimpsest of black time exposes how any line of flight made possible in the Afropresent always unfolds in relation to the racial traumas of the past and the precarities of black futures. Thus, far from a flight from history, or a pessimistic rejection of the future, or a naive celebration of the present, Afropresentism is instead a heightened attunement to black possibility in the here and now, knowing that in the face of antiblackness the enjoyment of these possibilities will likely be as fleeting and ephemeral as the Free Southern Theater's live performances or, more broadly, the very ontology of performance itself.<sup>18</sup> What to Afropessimism is the moment of the present?

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## Notes

- 1 Achille Mbembe (2003: 39) calls into question the ancillary position that theories of biopower assign to death. Centering death in his analysis, Mbembe proposes a model of necropolitics to theorize the ways in which sovereignty is deployed toward the goal of destroying certain members of society.

- 2 Whereas black studies and social theory take space as key critical concerns, this article aims to make time more central to these discourses. It contributes to a burgeoning field I have called elsewhere “black time studies” (Fleming 2019).
- 3 Legal scholar Charles Ogletree (2004: 299) notes that when civil rights lawyers consulted the dictionary to uncover the meaning of “all deliberate speed,” they concluded that the court’s phrase meant “slow.”
- 4 I borrow the term “racial time” from political scientist Michael Hanchard (1999: 252). According to Hanchard racial time is “the inequalities of temporality that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups” (253).
- 5 I borrow the concept of “the wait” from performance studies scholar Harvey Young (2010: 42–43). Young is likewise interested in how the process of waiting animates the various segments of the transatlantic slave trade and black life more broadly.
- 6 The field of black geographies has begun to emphasize the role of black racial identity in the production of space and geography. See, for example, Davis 2011; McKittrick 2006; Shabazz 2015; and McKittrick and Woods 2007.
- 7 On this front, if we return to the context of postemancipation Mississippi, it was not by accident that sharecropping’s corrupt manipulations of black labor time both mirrored and replaced the cruel regime of black labor that had been the motor of Atlantic chattel slavery, creating what historian Douglas A. Blackmon (2008) calls “slavery by another name.”
- 8 Constructions of the South as a distinctively problematic region are often an exercise in “imaginative geography”—that is, a practice of “designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’” (Said 1978: 54–55).
- 9 As Thadious M. Davis (2011: 2–4) has argued, even as the South has, in many ways, been a closed society for people of African descent, black southerners have nonetheless managed to use the very space of the US South to curate empowering forms of being, creativity, and sociality.
- 10 While Derby and O’Neal worked as field secretaries for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, Moses was a writer for the *Mississippi Free Press*, a weekly civil rights newspaper.
- 11 I borrow the concept of docile bodies from Michel Foucault (1977: 136), who captures how modernity uses discipline as a means to subject bodies to “constraints, prohibitions, and obligations” that render them docile—or in the “grip of very strict powers.”
- 12 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “patience,” [www.oed.com/view/Entry/138816?rskey=gefoWY&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138816?rskey=gefoWY&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid) (accessed May 12, 2018).
- 13 According to bell hooks (1990), sites of “radical openness” are spaces that enable an opportunity to “redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality” (147).

- 14 I borrow the term “black-south body” from literary critic Houston A. Baker Jr. (2001: 81).
- 15 According to theater historian Bruce McConachie (1992: 169), theater history has routinely privileged the “means” over the “relations” of theatrical production, engendering a critical tendency to “separate the aesthetic from the practical.” Further, in tracing the etymology of theatrical production to discourses surrounding political economy in the eighteenth century, namely, to Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), McConachie draws a striking connection between the linguistic genealogy of theatrical production and global genealogies of industrial capitalism. This relation is certainly apparent when plantation geographies are transformed into sites of black theatrical performance.
- 16 As scholarship on race and leisure has demonstrated, slaves were given limited amounts of time for black leisure. But this time was often filled with personal chores like gardening and washing and was often under surveillance. See, for example, Holland 2002. Also, scholars like Hartman (1997) remind us that leisure itself has often been a site of antiblack violence.
- 17 For concepts of “black time” and “white time,” see Warren 2016 and Mills 2014, respectively.
- 18 The very nature of performance has been a point of serious discussion throughout performance studies discourses. See, for example, Taylor 2003 and Phelan 1993.

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