

The maps behind the movement: African-American freedom struggles as geographical work

Derek H. Alderman
Professor, Geography, University of Tennessee

Civil rights struggles, whether spectacular moments of formal protest or daily acts of defiance and survival, often involve the strategic planning and mobilization of resources, bodies, and information. In other words, African-American resistance was and is a matter of work, the product and process of physical, emotional, and social labor. I argue for an examination of African-American freedom struggles as “geographical work.” As part of the fight against white supremacy, African-Americans have long participated in (counter) mapping, collecting and analyzing social and geographical data and intelligence, spatial planning, and various forms of radical place (re)making. I offer a series of vignettes that demonstrate the different categories of geographical work and various kinds of radical cartographies that African-Americans have engaged in as they have sought to take control of their own lives and spaces in the face of rampant racism. These vignettes cross a range of historical periods, case studies, and political contexts – from efforts to escape slavery, to the navigation of Jim Crow segregation, to famous and less well known campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement, and finally to more contemporary place claiming struggles. I conclude by calling for the help of professional geographers and other scholars, asking that we consider ways to make civil rights more central to geographic research, teaching, and outreach while also recognizing the role that space and place played in African-American freedom struggles.