DOI: 10.14714/CP109.1989

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

SNCC Cartoons as Counter-Mapping Black Futures: On Creative Geographies of the Civil Rights Movement

Joshua Inwood
The Pennsylvania State University
jfi6@psu.edu

Reagan Yessler
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
ryessler@vols.utk.edu

Derek Alderman
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
dalderma@utk.edu

In the mid-1960s, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) created a series of educational comics. We argue these comics represent the melding of artistic geographies with an early form of GIScience, and thus push geography to include an expanded set of activities within its understanding of what constitutes GIScience. We argue these comics are a form of radical placemaking and represent how Black geographies are at the center of broad struggles for justice. By incorporating the knowledge of Black geographies within GIScience, we can extend our understanding of geography more broadly. This impacts our understanding of how political geography can center and be responsive to Black liberation struggles.

KEYWORDS: Critical GIS; participatory mapping; graphic narratives; GIScience

1965 was a pivotal year in the long, painful, and often violent struggle for civil and social rights in the United States. Driven by the efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), two prominent civil rights organizations, thousands of people from across the United States converged on rural Alabama and undertook a march from Selma to the state capitol, Montgomery, to pressure President Lyndon Johnson and the United States Congress to pass legislation ensuring the right to vote (Combs 2013). The effort was met with a violent reaction by the white power structure in Alabama, and on March 7, 1965, civil rights marchers were beaten by local and state police forces on the Edmund Pettus Bridge (Emmons 2018). "Bloody Sunday" led to widespread demonstrations and eventually to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which expanded the right to vote across the American South and extended the franchise to include African Americans who had long been excluded from the polls. In the wake of this victory, SNCC faced another challenge: how do you educate thousands of newly enfranchised African American voters on the power of the vote and the many local and statewide offices they would be asked to vote for? Layered on top of this challenge was a reality that voters in rural Alabama, and indeed throughout the Deep South, were often illiterate and lacked basic civic knowledge or education, which was denied them because of the realities of segregation in the US South (Staimpel 2021, Gillespie 2014). To meet this challenge, SNCC created a series of comic-like books to educate locals about their power to elect local and statewide officials and take charge of their communities (Perlstein 1990).

Us Colored People, Sheriff, and *Board of Education* are the fruits of that effort. These political education comics and other storytelling aids produced by SNCC used basic but evocative illustrations and combined knowledge of elected offices with suggestions of how Black men and women could challenge their oppression by exercising the right to vote and even filling political offices previously off limits to them (Table 1). SNCC's comics highlight a creative and important, if understudied, organizing strategy centered around understanding and redefining the unjust political landscape of Alabama. Crucially, we contend that these pamphlets and comics represent an example of an insurgent counter-mapping of political power and the imagining of Black socio-spatial futures. While the 1965 Voting Rights Act ensured, on paper, a right to vote, it did not rid oppressed communities of long-entrenched racist orders that would continue to intimidate and manipulate Black voters and take advantage of their electoral inexperience (Finkelman 2015). Embracing the idea of African Americans as independent political agents capable of reworking the distribution of rights and resources within

© by the author(s). This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0.

their own communities, SNCC had a tradition of using education, communication, and artistic innovations to support Black Southerners in their efforts to understand, navigate, and resist the white supremacist power structure (Inwood and Alderman 2021). These innovations, such as the comics discussed here, are indicative of how geography was and remains central to understanding the US civil rights struggle *and* represents an example of how "Black matters are [and always have been] spatial matters" (Hawthorne 2019).

Perhaps as geographically significant, we argue these comics represent an early and unrecognized form of GIScience when we release the concept from its industrial and technocratic moorings. It is important to recognize the capacity of GIScience, and mapping in general, to serve within Black storytelling and place-remaking practices that center liberation over scientific or commercial conventions (Kelley 2021, Alderman and Inwood 2024). Comics are inherently spatial structures that engage cartographic elements, explicitly and implicitly, and "offer new and

Comic Title	Description	Hyperlink to PDF
Us Colored People	Comic follows "Mr. Blackman" as he gains political consciousness, registers to vote, and becomes sheriff, showing how ordinary people could replace oppressive public officials.	https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_us_colored.pdf
Sheriff	Comic explains the sheriff's duties and powers, including control of racialized violence. LCFO candidate Sidney Logan featured on the cover.	https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_sheriff.pdf
Board of Education	Comic breaks down school board roles, budget oversight, and how local control can improve Black community schools. LCFO candidates Hinson, Strickland, and Logan featured on the cover.	https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_educ.pdf
Tax Assessor	Comic explains the power of the tax assessor in property valuation and how their assessments affect tax payments. Portrays a Black female serving in the role. LCFO candidate Alice Moore featured on the cover.	https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_assesor.pdf
Tax Collector	Comic illustrates job responsibilities of the tax collector, how taxes fund public services, and accountability in civic finances. LCFO candidate Frank Miles featured on the cover.	https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_tax.pdf
Coroner	Comic outlines the coroner's duties, their power to subpoena, investigate murders, and replace the sheriff if necessary. LCFO candidate Emory Ross featured on the cover.	https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_coronor.pdf

Table 1. SNCC Political Education Comics: Titles, Purposes, and Archival Links (Source: SNCC Digital Gateway & Civil Rights Movement Archive).

unpredicted ways to theorize about maps" (Peterle 2015, 69). The efficacy of SNCC's comics, like any maps and especially those within Black cartographic traditions, comes from their power to guide readers and users, not just in a physical and strict locational sense, but also in raising their political awareness and embodying alternative ways of seeing and being in the world (Yessler and Alderman 2021). Rendered in the pages of these 1960s educational comics was a recognition of the way power is inscribed in the landscape *and* how the use and exercise of political power in the United States is wholly reflective of race and racism. SNCC's comics were drawn and disseminated by their creators to connect individual Black voters into larger voting blocs and to enact political power by remaking the power structure in rural Alabama through local and statewide elections. They infused the comics with a daily geographic knowledge derived from Black lived political experiences and needs, and worked to translate it into usable and accessible data that a broad swath of the population could readily understand (Fraser 2019, Tomiuc et al. 2022). We contend that their mobilization of information and communication holds significant lessons for geographers in the twenty-first century.

By studying SNCC's efforts, our work deepens scholarly and public understanding of SNCC's creative geographies and explores the development and use of comics by civil rights organizations. We argue these comics represent the melding of artistic geographies with an early form of GIScience and extend our understanding of the social structures and relationships that undergird white supremacy and African American resistance. This pushes geography to incorporate an expanded set of representations and activities within the framework of GIScience and impacts our understanding of how political geography can center and be responsive to Black liberation struggles (Bledsoe et al. 2017, Ogborn 2023, Alderman et al. 2021). We argue these comics are a form of radical placemaking and represent how Black geographies are at the center of broad struggles for justice, and by incorporating the knowledge of Black geographies within GIScience, we can extend our understanding of geography more broadly. The fight for justice, which we document in this manuscript, has contemporary resonance, and the creative practice of SNCC may offer examples that can impact how we think about civics and civic culture today.

BACKGROUND

THE EVOLUTION OF GISCIENCE: TOWARD PROBLEM-SOLVING

The field of GIScience has long been defined by technological innovations, and the use of those (primarily computer-based) innovations to understand complex phenomena (Goodchild 2010). Many of these developments are associated with business and government interests in geographic data (e.g., Swann 1999, Crampton 2015, Hanchard 2024). The attentions of large corporations and the military-industrial complex are often seen as handmaidens to empires, and the use of GIS technologies is sometimes mired in controversy (Bryan and Wood 2015). The early field of GIScience, and efforts to define and describe its significance, tended to emphasize quantitative methods, computational techniques, and a broadly conceived positivistic framework. Perhaps most famously, Michael Goodchild described GIScience as "the science behind the [geographic information] systems" (1992, 6), and early efforts in the field focused around fundamental questions that at their heart were interested in geospatial software and spatial data modeling. Crucially, this perspective tended to focus attention on how GIScience was a storehouse of knowledge, and emphasized the technical challenges associated with this emerging field. This initial framing of the field casts GIScience as a computational, information science, which sought to establish GIScience's legitimacy within a broadly understood positivistic framework.

While these early efforts defined GIScience narrowly, more recent works, especially interventions from feminist, critical, and participatory perspectives, have sought to expand the epistemological and methodological limits of the field. This includes the advent of critical GIS and its focus on the broader societal impacts of GIScience (Sui 2015, Burns 2021, Keighren et al. 2015, Puente and Vélez 2024), and the integration of qualitative methodologies into GIScience (Cope and Elwood 2009, Taylor et al. 2020). There have also been more recent efforts to improve our awareness of human differences, and to understand how those differences influence the impacts of GIScience and the ways we come to see and understand

the world (Conte and Napolillo 2024). Arguing that treating GIScience as a purely technical or positivist enterprise overlooked the value-laden nature of knowledge, critical scholarship in the field has emphasized that all knowledge is situated and as a result has questioned the broader positivistic foundations of the discipline. Fully developing critical GIS, according to Lally (2022, 337), requires moving beyond disciplinary and professional certainties, definitions, and norms: it is about acknowledging that "we do not know what GIS can do" and recognizing that what counts as "GIS emerges in the doings and practices of GIS," especially in community mapping projects that make visible the current limitations and future possibilities for expanding how we conceptualize and apply GIS more broadly. Lally (2022) advocates for a critical GIS characterized by a geographic imagination, openness to encounters with a variety of participants, experimentation with GIS foundational ideas, and embedded within situated social practices and struggles. This embrace of a more open, experimental, and socially responsive approach to what GIS is and the work it can do certainly motivates our discussion of SNCC comics.

Parallel to the rise of critical GIS was a blossoming of critical cartography—a perspective that interrogates the power relations embedded in maps and advocates for alternative mapping practices. Pioneers like J. B. Harley had shown that far from being neutral scientific documents, maps are social constructions that have historically served state and colonial power, often silencing or "erasing" certain peoples and places. Building on this insight, critical cartographers in the 2000s began examining how mapping could be turned toward emancipatory ends. Crampton and Krygier (2005), for instance, describe an evolving field of critical cartography devoted to emancipatory and subversive mapping practices emerging outside the realms traditionally controlled by state and corporate institutions. In other words, maps, and by extension geographical information systems, could be made by communities, activists, and artists in order to challenge dominant knowledge structures rather than uphold them.

What is important about the SNCC comic book series is how SNCC activists engaged in many of the broader questions that currently define debates in GIScience, critical cartography, and mapping. For example, take several of the core tenets of GIScience: that it is used to solve problems by creating representations of where things are, and those representations are grounded in existing communities. As we demonstrate in this article, SNCC was engaged in complex problem-solving through a geographic understanding of the communities in which they were working. Inwood and Alderman (2021, 2020) have shown through their work on civil rights geographies that SNCC's research department was engaged in counter-mapping white supremacy, and they have examined the informational and research praxis that was so foundational to the work SNCC was doing in the deep southeastern United States. Their work on SNCC raises questions about the need for a more complex reading of the development of GIScience, one with a longer history that includes how spatial analysis developed alongside broader struggles for justice and took visual forms that were intimately geospatial, even if they do not look like conventional data and maps from a strict industrial or technological perspective.

Crucially, we argue that we need to see that the evolution from an earlier era of computational GIScience to the present critical cartographies represents a trajectory of opening GIScience up to critique, to plural epistemologies, and ultimately to alternative modes of geographic knowledge production. Counter-mapping and critical cartography, especially as employed in Black geographies and other social justice contexts, have shown that maps can be tools of liberation as much as tools of empire. By challenging dominant knowledge structures and embracing situated, resistive, and creative mappings, they have carved out intellectual space within GIScience for ethics, reflexivity, and empowerment. SNCC's comic maps of the 1960s may not have been recognized as "GIScience" at the time, but in retrospect they embody exactly the kind of expanded GIScience that critical geographers call for; one that merges rigorous spatial thinking with art, narrative, and community engagement to foster new understandings of place and power. Such integrations underscore that the future of GIScience lies in its ability to continually redefine what mapping is for and who it serves.

The SNCC comics we interpret in this paper are emblematic of the organization's counter-mapping and geospatial activism. The comics—along with training workshops and the mass distribution of other educational materials—were meant to challenge the electoral basis of racist social and spatial structures by offering creative, non-conforming cartographic interventions. These interventions were meant to guide African Americans in understanding how their communities were organized and operated politically and how, when deploying that knowledge, Black

social actors and groups could remap their place of power within their state and region. Counter-mapping is understood within human geography, critical humanities, and community organizing as a discrete spatial storytelling practice not necessarily dependent upon or entirely situated within GIS (Mogel and Bhagat 2007). However, we also feel it is important that we view counter-mapping as a critical subset of GIS and make room intellectually and politically for SNCC comics and to use this artistic-activist innovation to open and complicate narrow conceptualizations of cartography and GIS. Doing so, as we suggest elsewhere (Alderman and Inwood 2024), is a necessity since "Diversifying GIS is not just about widening the demographics of talent in the field, but doing greater justice to the full range of histories and identities that have comprised cartographic performance and recognizing the many years of Black contributions to mapping along ethical and social justice lines" (312).

As we noted previously, we often associate GIScience with technological developments related to spatial data, with those definitions of data conforming to white- and masculine-centric Western epistemologies. However, as we also document, GIScience scholars have been keen to move beyond seeing GIS as a set of technological advancements and instead to see GIScience as a way of thinking and understanding the world. We argue in this paper that SNCC and their work open spaces to see how GIScience is exercised through geographic praxis grounded in a Black tradition of resistance. This broadens the history of the field of GIScience and, if taken seriously, brings geographic understandings long-ignored by the discipline to the forefront. If we take Hawthorne's (2019) admonition that Black matters are spatial matters, it necessarily follows that the broader pan-African experience expands the scope and scale of our understanding of geographic praxis and theory. This also raises questions about how we know and represent geographic data.

SNCC'S GEOGRAPHIC PRAXIS: COUNTER-MAPPING WHITE SUPREMACY

Although largely neglected by geographers until recently, SNCC embraced a geographic praxis of rigorously tracking, analyzing, and visualizing information about where things are and how things in one location are related to what happens in other locations. SNCC produced and used conventional and unconventional maps, detailed community-level reports, place-based photography and education, and other creative forms of spatial representation—all of which formed a series of Black counter-mapping practices. This counter-mapping not only documented white supremacy in the deep southeastern United States, but also advanced understanding of the broad economic relationships it formed, as well as how it created landscapes of inequality in the region and nation (e.g., Inwood and Alderman 2020, Alderman et al. 2023, Alderman and Inwood 2024). In their several studies of SNCC's insurgent geospatial work, Derek Alderman and Joshua Inwood call for a retheorization of the broad development of geographic thought and practice that makes room for wider freedom dreams and struggles of Black oppressed communities during the Civil Rights Movement. The research praxis developed within SNCC and other civil rights organizations represented an organic, grassroots intellectualism that arose and existed in parallel to broader developments in the discipline of geography. Instead of seeing these developments as happening outside of or independent from each other, it is more productive to see how geographic thought includes these broader freedom struggles and is informed by them.

SNCC's comics-based communications emerged from the organization's emphasis on counter-mapping, continuing a resistant tradition of Black GIScience that, in its own right, has expanded what counts as a map, who is a mapmaker, and what political work maps can and should do (Alderman and Inwood 2024). The comic book series represented a counter-mapping in two ways. First, they rendered in black and white a vision of the political world in which white supremacy did not dominate. The comics outlined a picture of Southern communities in which Black voices, lives, and rights most assuredly had a legitimate place—a remapping of who belonged and mattered in the South and America. Second, the very fact that these were drawings challenged or countered what counted—then in the 1960s and even today—as politically actionable expressions of geographic knowledge. As Kelley (2021) argues so effectively, Black geographic knowledge has long existed in creative cultural productions—including artistic expression—not confined to the official tenets of geography, cartography, and GIScience. Drawing inspiration from the ideas of Katherine McKittrick, Nimoh (2025) notes that these alternative creative practices are about unmapping the exclusion of Black communities and spaces by traditional, white-dominated cartographies, while also

remapping to create knowledge guides and forms of storytelling necessary for Black survival in the face of that racism.

SNCC's political education through comics was one innovation among many mobilized by civil rights workers to understand, challenge, and counter-map the spatiality of white supremacy. For example, around the same time SNCC's research department was producing comics for voters, it generated another educational document titled *Mississippi: A Colony of Standard Oil and Sears, Roebuck*. The document begins by tracing and analyzing the interconnections between Standard Oil and the Sears Company at a time of rapidly expanding US hegemony. SNCC's activist-researchers write:

> The political and economic power of the men who run and profit from Sears, Roebuck & Co., and the Standard Oil of California stretch like the tentacles of an octopus deep into Mississippi and Alabama, the black ghettos of Harlem and Watts and Chicago, the dictatorships of Brazil and South Africa, Venezuela and Spain, the Middle East, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic and many other strongholds of oppression. (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 1965, 1)

What immediately stands out from this document is how it relates to broad economic analysis and expansion of American global hegemony through multi-national corporations that, at the time, were also a focus of crucial work emerging within critical geography (e.g., Magdoff 1969). SNCC's analysis mirrors the kinds of work that were starting to take hold in geographic research within the decade (e.g., Harris 1972, Ginsburg 1973, Persky 1972, Brookfield 1972, Blaut 1974, Leeds 1975) and is indicative of the kind of insurgent geographies that were vital to the civil rights struggle.

SNCC researchers were documenting the ways economic and political conditions in Mississippi were not accidental, but the direct result of a set of economic and political policies that were designed to keep people in poverty—what James Blaut described a decade later as a set of "social and political institutions enforced by violence" and designed to extract the maximum amount of value from Black communities (1974, 39). More recently, Clyde Woods documents in his book, *Development Arrested*, that the "colonial aspect of community development" in Mississippi has always been vital to understanding how the region developed and the enduring legacies of the US plantation economy in the region (1998, 282). Woods's cogent analysis mirrors SNCC's, and reflects the realities of white supremacy. All of this work—Blaut, Woods, and SNCC—represents a kind of regional analysis that opens up space to understand how the making of space and place in Mississippi constitutes and reflects the broader racial economy (Inwood 2023). This also redefines how we as geographers value the work of SNCC. While the civil rights organization is not traditionally seen within the context of geography, it nonetheless brought cutting-edge analysis, critical education, and information gathering about a region that was and remains central to the American racial project (Alderman et al. 2023).

Mississippi: A Colony of Standard Oil and Sears, Roebuck highlights the kind of geographic analysis that was foundational to the intellectual project of understanding American racial capitalism and is an analysis that would have found a home in the burgeoning field of critical geography that was starting to take hold in geographic thought and practice. SNCC researchers, for example, broke down the number of workers employed by both the Standard Oil and Sears corporations in different areas of Mississippi and the conditions of poverty in those communities, as well as levels of political repression and racial violence in this region of the United States. By documenting the largest shareholders of these corporations and mapping out their connections to other boards of directors and other international corporations, SNCC created a power map of socio-spatial networks and relationships that connected racism in Mississippi with different regions of the world; it was a map that clearly transcended conventional cartographic forms and geospatial data practices of the 1960s. These geographic data, and their mapping, represent a holistic and dynamic way of understanding the South and its connections to economic and geographic theory, but they also expose the spatial interrelations between people and places that appear, on their surface, to have nothing to do with one another. This ability to expose the imbricated nature of capitalism with poverty and racism speaks to a sophisticated geographic analysis that many contemporary practitioners of geography would find familiar and which SNCC's research department was pioneering at the time.

For example, the SNCC research document points out the political connections between Sears and Standard Oil, the Mississippi Economic Council (MEC), and the state Chamber of Commerce, which are responsible for drafting almost all the legislation related to business in Mississippi.

In Mississippi, local and statewide chamber offices often worked hand in glove with ardent segregationists. They provided the economic foundation for the state's more violent extremists to resist the desegregation of Mississippi (McMillen 1994). This analysis reflects an early version of power mapping—mapping the dense, spider-web of lines of corporate and government power and influence in order to visualize the links between different entities all complicit in maintaining white supremacy (Crampton 2001).

At the heart of SNCC's counter-mapping against white supremacy was a realization that racism, as social and spatial reality, was not merely a *thing* but a set of relations and connections that could be tracked and mapped. Understanding where these political connections existed was crucial for understanding the economics behind white resistance to civil rights and analyzing how to take on these systems by identifying their weak points, where pressure could be mobilized to force change. SNCC was constantly looking for the specific pressure points where protests and boycotts could be applied to cripple the system of segregation and white supremacy that had long held the region's Black people back. Perhaps nowhere is this reality more exposed than in a section that includes a discussion of prominent Mississippi legislators and their connections to Sears and Standard Oil, including legal connections and efforts of these legislators through their law firms to represent the interests of these corporations in the state. The research document finishes by stating:

> The point to this analysis is that corporations . . . do not simply operate factories and department stores, pay wages, and issue dividend checks. It should be obvious that the fact that Sears and Standard Oil have invested money in Mississippi influences the politics of Mississippi. Sears and Standard, as far as we can see, have chosen to support the Mississippi way of Life, which has degraded and broken so many millions of poor people in the state. (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 1965, 5)

Returning to the development of GIScience, the above passage is instructive. Recently, Zhao (2022, 1586) argues for the need to move beyond seeing GIScience as "an isolated object" or field of study; instead, it is necessary to "situate [GIScience] in an experiential structure between its user and the perceived place" under study. SNCC was engaged in this very kind of analysis and was focused on how the South's broader economic and political landscape was produced and how that landscape impacted the lives of everyday men and women in the region.

Additionally, the documents that SNCC produced are written in a way that communicates knowledge with community members who need information to make important decisions about the direction of their communities. *Mississippi: A Colony of Standard Oil and Sears, Roebuck* is not just a research document or paper about corporate support of racism. Rather it is a geospatial practice, a way of mapping racialized economic power—where it existed, and where oppressed communities can challenge it. Maps, according to Wood and Fels (1992), are propositions or arguments about how the world is understood, and similarly, SNCC's *Mississippi* document communicated a clear geospatial argument to everyday men and women about how their world operated unjustly and how they might take political power into their own hands. Like many of SNCC's informational and educational weapons, including its educational comics program, *Mississippi: A Colony of Standard Oil and Sears, Roebuck* shared information with communities in ways that are accessible and relatable; reaffirming what Zhao (2022) discusses as the situated knowledge between those who use GIScience and places with grounded, material conditions.

This point connects with more recent attempts in academic geography to push the field to think about how geographic knowledge can be communicated more clearly and persuasively and how GIScience can positively impact and serve society and communities (Mark 2003). The question of how GIScience impacts society has taken on added urgency in a moment defined by global climate change, the rise of reactionary politicians and politics, and the spread of worldwide conflict and militarism (Nelson et al. 2022). As Nelson et al. write in their piece on the culture of science, we need to ask: "Does the culture of science . . . truly reflect the needs and desires of all of humanity, or is science better at service to some segments of society than others?" (Nelson et al. 2022, 1). SNCC's GIScience work in the heart of the Deep South demonstrates that methods and analysis are not dependent on computer advances as much as they are dependent on advances in storytelling—which requires knowing the communities you work in and the needs they have, and understanding how to communicate information in ways that are easily understood and acted upon by those communities.

TELLING STORIES WITH GISCIENCE

Storytelling and cartography are intimately related, and this relationship goes back to some of the earliest traditions of cartography (e.g., Harley and Woodward 1989, Crampton 2001, Roth 2021). As technologies have changed and the amount of data available to mapmakers has increased, how we represent the world through science and cartographic traditions has also changed. This has brought new challenges for mapmakers and geographers who (re)interpret the world through maps. Slayton and Benner (2021) argue, "To tell a good story is human, but to build a story with convincing evidence takes practice." The work of cartographers and other geospatial scientists is thus not just about creating an informative map; rather, the work is about creating aids to understanding political, social, and physical places and the movements possible therein. What is imperative is ensuring that these aids are consumable, understandable, and create empathy for the place and subject.

We understand GIScience as fundamentally about storytelling, allowing us to see the practice continuing a millennia-long tradition of passing information from group to group (Sax 2006). Storytelling has never been merely an entertainment tool; instead, it has always been a strategy to condense a plethora of information into manageable and memorable chunks by making artistic or stylistic choices (Sax 2006). As the US became more multicultural, as identity and the different freedoms of movement tied therein became more convoluted, strategies to understand these dynamics became all the more important; GIScience became not only a method to understand movement but a way to tell one's own story, and define one's own identity through mapping (Sax 2006). Storytelling about race in the Jim Crow South became, in itself, an act of mapping, as it solidified the nuanced and particularly local ways individuals dealt with this social system. These individuals combined this oral tradition with photos or illustrations engaged with storytelling practices of memory aids, giving anchors on which to hang particular pieces of knowledge. The combination of the oral, visual, and holistic practice of storytelling makes GIScience effective; a narrative gives meaning to data, and visual aids give concrete examples of numbers and locations. To be effective, GIScience must, thus, engage in storytelling that is resonant to wider communities, especially those whose lives and wellbeing depend so heavily on the enacted information. While post-truth politics may appear to be a recent development, the reality is that challenging white supremacy has always been a battle over information, and pushing back against racist control and misrepresentation of stories about oppressed communities; and producing narratives that assert their humanity, contributions, and rights.

COMMUNICATING POWER THROUGH THE USE OF COMICS

Wright (2019) notes that scholars are often trained to produce knowledge—whether through their research or teaching—in ways secluded from the masses. This, in turn, does not aid in liberating communities or creating new cartographies, nor does it allow for communicating information in easily digestible ways, or making that information into an actionable social resource for those communities. Information often sits behind paywalls or tuition schemes, and the venues we work in often reproduce racial and gender hierarchies and can reinforce geographic inequalities that are rooted in much longer histories of oppression and exclusion. SNCC is an instructive intervention because its knowledge production praxis was tied so intimately to the needs of oppressed communities. SNCC was not about just documenting the long history of segregation or white supremacy. Nor was it interested in reporting on the racialized economy to generate headlines. Rather, SNCC workers sought to produce information in service to a greater struggle and to give Black citizens the evidence they needed to be able to strike against the broad structures and individual agents who were oppressing them. The creative cartographic practices of SNCC are an important moment of reflection for GIScience and geography in general, an invitation to think through how and in what ways we produce knowledge and how it impacts the creation of more equitable and just communities.

To understand the depth and breadth of SNCC's engagement in the communities they worked in and with, it is necessary to trace the origins of the group's founding. SNCC arose out of the frustrations of Ella Baker and student leaders within other civil rights organizations as they sought an alternative to the Civil Rights Movement's hierarchical and patriarchal structure. SNCC was formed

during a conference at Shaw University in North Carolina in 1960. The group was grassroots in nature and focused on empowering local communities to advocate for themselves. SNCC often worked in the most dangerous communities in the rural South, where the threat of violence was an ever-present reality. These communities were riven with a corrupt white power structure that did not suffer challenges; SNCC workers were often harassed, intimidated, and sometimes even beaten or murdered in their effort to bring about equality and economic empowerment in Black, underserved communities.

The early leadership of SNCC was aware of the danger, and they worked to create a structure that could survive the loss of leadership. As a result, there was an early focus on information gathering and documenting so that a new cadre of leadership could easily step in and continue the work in the event of the assassination of one or more leadership positions. As part of their efforts, SNCC workers trained students in non-violence and undertook community organizing throughout the region, including Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. Given the geographically diverse nature of the struggle, SNCC was also interested in the spread of intelligence and in educating a movement through power maps, freedom schools, freedom libraries, freedom theaters, and other forms and places of knowledge production and dissemination strategies that became foundational to SNCC's work.

Perhaps SNCC activist and organizer Mary King captures this sentiment best: "Communication goes to the very heart of how non-violent struggle works" (quoted in Murphree 2003, 24). What may appear as routine or even boring tasks, such as gathering people for a march, or researching the best place for a march to take place, or coordinating volunteers, actually involve a geographically complex set of questions that point to the kind of deep analysis and geospatial work that was central to the effectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement. As we demonstrate in the next section, the cartoons, comics, and pamphlets were central to this project and illustrate how SNCC produced a variety of informational praxis that communicated how communities operated and the vital and important role elected officials played in the political lives of community members.

CREATIVE CARTOGRAPHIES

As we will demonstrate, the creative cartographies and comics SNCC produced were meant to be easily reproduced and understood by people from a wide variety of backgrounds. In many cases, the pictorial representations and textual descriptions contained in the comics could be understood by people who lacked basic literacy skills—a reality for many of the sharecroppers and poor farmers in the Deep South, resulting from the inequalities produced through white supremacy. They were also an excellent medium for SNCC to spread information, and were effective, in that they sparked less-coordinated protests amongst groups and individuals who recognized "a sense of injustice and had to act on it" (Eig 2023, 220). Comics are helpful for those who are politically disadvantaged and forcibly written off the map or isolated from political agency and organizing because comics are often easier to read and appeal to visual learners (Yessler and Alderman 2021). Comics can also meld different disciplines, bringing scientific and cartographic practices out of the ivory tower and bringing knowledge to the masses through creative artistic representations (Hatfield 2000). Lastly, comics, in general, get the intellectual into the physical by visualizing the movement of a person or concept. These representations often solidify concepts for readers and turn abstract ideas into real, concrete representations (Peterle 2015). To understand the broad implications, we want to turn to a specific analysis of each of the SNCC-produced comics.

US COLORED PEOPLE

White supremacy within the US is a combined spatial and social system that is geographically diffused and reflects specific geographic realities in different regions and places (Pulido 2023). Historically, these practices have included segregation laws, forced prison labor, sundown towns, the use of legal and extra-legal violence, redlining, restrictive covenants, and the selective enforcement of rules, regulations, and laws. Since the means of oppression are spatialized, resistance to these myriad oppressions is also necessarily spatialized. SNCC's geospatial practices and counter-mapping were focused on self-emancipation through a range of grounded, community-centered activities (Kelley 2021). Centering this vision of geographic information praxis challenges our field of geography to "conceive of mapping and its ethical possibilities in more creative and community-centered ways outside of the strict convention of industry standards, professionalized practices, and academic definitions and categories" (Alderman and Inwood 2024, 309).

Perhaps no finer example of these realities exists than the comic ***Us Colored People***, written and illustrated by SNCC

workers Courtland Cox and Jennifer Lawson in 1965. The comic, according to Cox and Lawson, was produced for the Black citizens of Lowndes County, Alabama, to "get people to believe in their [own] power to affect change" (quoted in SNCC Digital Gateway 2025a). Lowndes County was perhaps the most dangerous and inhospitable place for Black activism in Alabama and one of the most violent counties for civil rights in the nation at that time. Located in the center of Alabama's Black Belt region—long home to cotton and agricultural production in the state—a white power structure ran the county and focused on the violent repression of Black freedom. Lowndes County was also home to the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). Founded in 1965 to register Black voters—Lowndes County had an 80% Black population, but not a single Black person was registered to vote—the LCFO was a precursor to the Black Panther Party, and featured a black panther as its symbol. It was an independent political party that provided an alternative to the corrupt and white supremacist Democratic Party, which ran the county and was an arm of the white power structure in the state.

Us Colored People centers around the main character, Mr. Blackman, a stand-in for Black readers who could project their identities into the comic character's journey. The comic focuses on Mr. Blackman's political awakening as he first becomes aware of politics, then registers to vote, and later becomes county sheriff (SNCC Digital Gateway 2025a). While modern and more well-known comic figures like the Black Panther or Batman are heroic, their methods of struggle are not replicable for anyone not possessed of unlimited money or super-human strength and intelligence (Peltier 2024). Mr. Blackman, on the other hand, was critical to representing identifiable social and spatial pathways to political and economic liberation, and the characters are grounded in local, specific, and identifiable geographies. The choice of a comic was intentional; as Cox explains, "We knew that people were not going to sit down and read law books" (quoted in SNCC Digital Gateway 2025a). Instead, they deployed straightforward and seemingly simplistic graphics and narrations in SNCC comics to depict the broad political power structure in the county and, specifically, the political awakening that was occurring as the civil rights struggle intensified. *Us Colored People* and other SNCC education comics were characterized by a plain layout of storyboard panels organized in a simple grid or block format to guide readers. Minimizing the number of words used and using a lot of white space to reduce visual clutter or noise further eased reading and comprehension. Hand-drawn illustrations within the comics focused less on capturing intricate detail in favor of graphic austerity, bold lines and high-contrast black-and-white visuals that suited cheap reproduction and distribution, essential to Civil Rights Movement work. Characters and symbols in the comics were stylized to convey moral clarity and emotional resonance, with heroes and oppressors easily distinguishable.

The raw and no-nonsense approach to producing SNCC comics reflected in part the fact that Lawson, by her own admission, was a "self-taught, amateur artist." But more importantly, it was about intentionally crafting a message that resonated with and would not intimidate oppressed and poorly educated Black communities in Alabama. Cox, when interviewed by SNCC activist turned journalist and professor Charles Cobb, described how the visual design of the comics was meant to widen their access and to convince Black folks that politically claiming and remaking their community was doable:

> But you . . . are not just saying register to vote; you're not just saying engage in the political process. You are saying, take over the county. So most people . . . who are illiterate and probably not highly education [*sic*], will be much afraid of that discussion. . . . Getting people who have never run for political office or never even voted to say we can be sheriff or tax assessor or probate judge . . . you need to tell them that this is not something that's really, really difficult. The education materials . . . were designed to . . . get the people who are running for office to see that this is something that can be done . . . create an imagery that allows people to think this is real. (SNCC Digital Gateway 2025b)

The opening page of *Us Colored People* features a four-panel depiction of the geographical setting of the main character, Mr. Blackman. Each panel features a different geographical scale, beginning with the broad nation and moving on to the state and then the county-level representation. In the first panel, we can see how the comic writers relied on known storytelling practices, such as beginning the story with the phrase, "Once upon a time. . .." The page layout engages with geography directly and scale jumps,

the practice of tracing economic and political links between the local, regional, and international (Smith 1992).

By positioning segregation next to panels showing the Statue of Liberty in front of an outline of the United States and moving towards an outline of Alabama filled in with a Confederate battle flag and the image of Black workers picking a crop in a field and then moving towards an image of Lowndes County, Alabama, the authors are engaged in an important relational form of mapping. First, they are placing the struggle in Lowndes County within a broader geography and, as other SNCC documents and writings illustrate, connecting the battle in the rural South to a broader economic and political geography of oppression. This comic is a visual, geospatial representation of a broad set of arguments and documents SNCC organizers and leadership were making. Second, in a not-so-subtle way, SNCC writers and comic creators focus specifically on the contradictions and hypocrisies of a country that was supposedly founded on the idea of liberty but which kept Black people in their place through violent enforcement of Jim Crow segregation. In addition, by focusing on the political organizing that was taking place in the South and specifically by including an image of a black panther, SNCC writers were setting the stage for readers to understand how the Lowndes County Freedom Organization could work to undermine the reality of white supremacy. Crucially, these images work without having to follow the accompanying text. By visually demonstrating how segregation manifests in the United States and connecting those realities to agricultural production and broader histories of enslavement, the cartoon writers focus on the foundational moments of America and the connection to contemporary economic policies. They also show how the realities of America are contradictory, and with political organizing, the realities of liberty and freedom can be attained.

As the comic book develops its storyline, Mr. Blackman, the main protagonist, navigates the segregated landscape of Alabama. In one poignant scene, Mr. Blackman navigates the process of registering to vote at a local courthouse, and even though he is continuously denied the right to vote, he highlights voter suppression tactics and laws. These panels show in vivid detail the struggles of one person trying to navigate the realities of voter suppression in the South. However, as Mr. Blackman continues on his journey, other Black people begin to notice and offer support. As this support builds, more and more people undertake the process of registering to vote. This culminates in a seven-panel spread on page seven, illustrating protestors gathering at a local courthouse. As the light fades in the background, more and more protestors draw near, signaling not only the passage of time but the sun setting on the realities of white power in the American South. Crucially, while centered in Lowndes County, Alabama, the comic has currency beyond Alabama and represents myriad struggles in the South. Working as a body of geospatial knowledge, this cartoon thus connects the battle in Alabama with other struggles and helps create a broader solidarity. We argue that this is a form of power mapping that seeks to navigate and expose the epicenters of white power and oppression and centers the struggle for civil rights within the context of a white power structure that used the law to keep Black people in conditions of poverty and denied basic human and legal rights to Black people.

As the storyline of *Us Colored People* develops, the movement for freedom picks up its pace and energy. It also shows the reaction of white officials to the freedom aspirations of Black people in the region. A section titled "the white folks threatened us" depicts the efforts of white officials threatening and intimidating Black protestors. It also depicts the white reaction to protests, showing how some Black people were kicked off their land and forced to live in tent cities in Lowndes County. Because most of the protestors were sharecroppers in the region, a common tactic used by white people was to evict protestors from their homes and rented land as punishment for participating in civil rights protests or being active electorally. This was especially harsh, as many of the people were poor and did not have the resources to move or to start over, and they found themselves homeless. In response, SNCC and other civil rights groups set up a tent city in Lowndes County to house homeless civil rights protestors and those caught up in the white reaction (Stack and Alderman 2024).

The final panels illustrate how an empowered and enfranchised Black community could push back against these realities and show African Americans who are "SICK and TIRED of being SICK and TIRED!" As the comic book ends, it depicts a group of Black people who are now "the majority of voters in the county" and demonstrates how political organizing in the region can change and challenge the lived realities of segregation. Thus, this readable and relatable educational comic is not just an illustrative

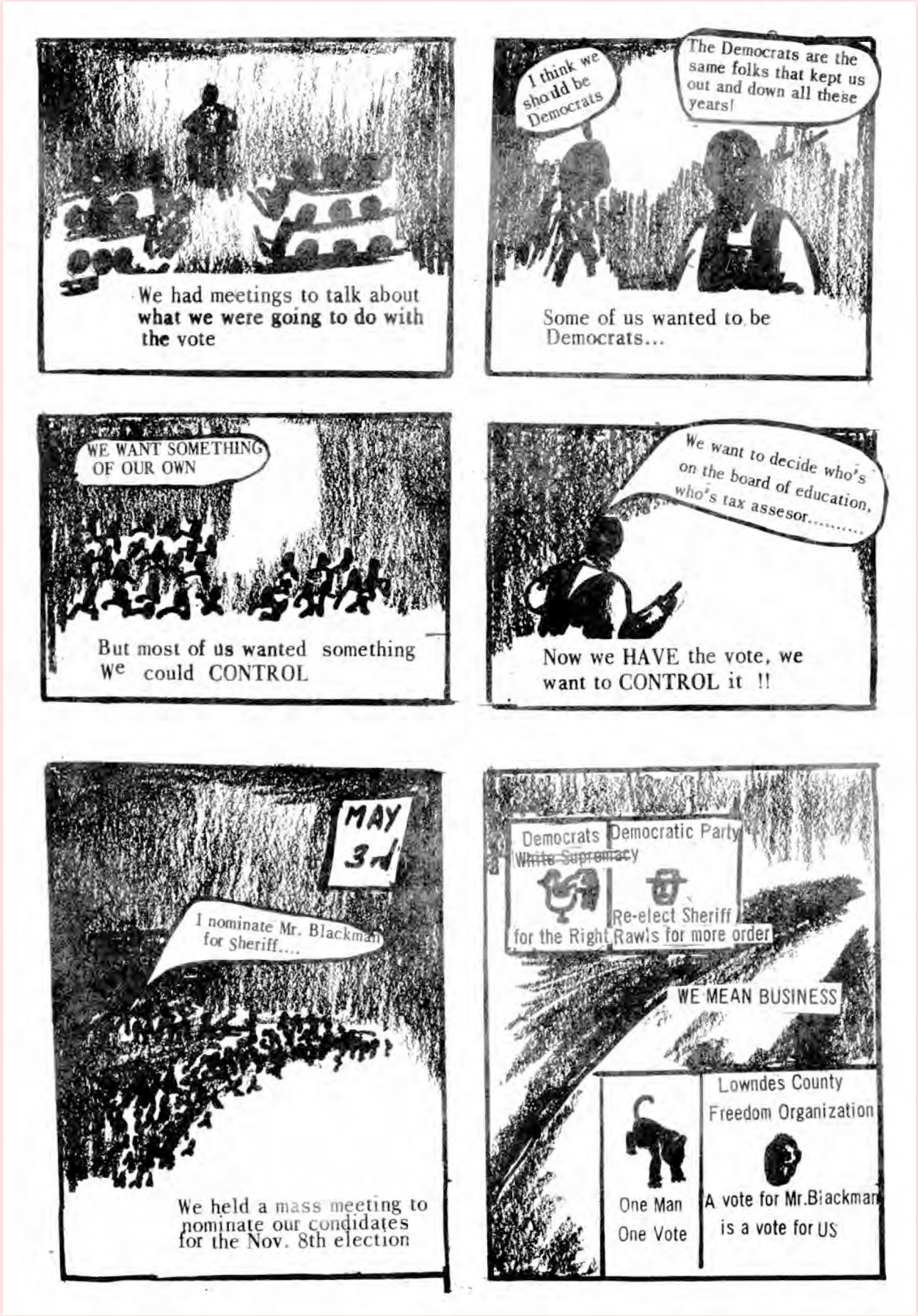

Figure 1. Page from SNCC political education comic, *Us Colored People*. Created by Courtland Cox and Jennifer Lawson, 1965. Source: **https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_us_colored.pdf**.

narrative; rather, it is working as a form of GIScience by counter-mapping the locations, consequences, and scalar relations that make up the political power structure underlying Alabama, the South, and America (Figure 1). And like good GIScience, it is seeking to create an actionable body of data important to problem-solving, one which shows the routes and solidarity necessary for political organizing to undermine and destabilize the existing white power structure, while guiding communities to see how that power structure is connected to a much longer history and broader geography of racial oppression.

SHERIFF

Created in 1966, ***Sheriff*** is one of the most important and illuminating comics created by SNCC. In terms of life and death in small Southern towns, no elected official had more power over the wellbeing of Black people than the local sheriff. By focusing on this position, SNCC was not only illuminating how local politics worked but also pushing for a reorganization of how law enforcement related to the communities they were ostensibly elected to serve. The front page of the comic book shows a photo of Sidney Logan, a candidate for sheriff at the time, and the interior pages go through the duties and powers of the office. In illustrating these duties, SNCC directly connects the oppression of civil rights workers and Black communities with the workings of local government and law enforcement. When producing the *Sheriff* comic and others like it to explain civic processes and responsibilities of elected leaders, Lawson and Cox carried out a collaborative and reflective process guided by more than just their own creativity and their guessing about the needs of the mobilized Black community. Lawson recounts how she and Cox chose visual imagery and dialogue for the comics "to reflect what we heard people [in Lowndes County] saying and the way that people there talked and articulated these same issues." The hope was to create a map grounded in real conversations that felt familiar and accessible, and mirrored the concerns of the local communities in which SNCC was organizing (SNCC Digital Gateway 2025b).

The most important portions of the *Sheriff* comic book can be found on the first and final pages. The first page is a three-row spread and begins not with a person but a place and a series of objects—the courthouse and a sheriff's star and gun. For many Black Southerners, these symbols were the focus of civil rights protests *and* the most visible and vital symbols of white power in the region. Given the isolated nature of many Southern towns, the sheriff in each town had almost unlimited power over the lives of the residents in the county. The image is captioned, "The sheriff keeps the peace in the county." This emphasis is central to understanding the role of the sheriff while also exposing the hypocrisy of a white power structure that focused on keeping "the peace" by eliminating threats to white power. From there, the comic goes on to describe the duties of the sheriff, including suppressing riots, stopping fights, breaking up unlawful assemblies, and forming posses to go and arrest people (Figure 2). The management of violence is a strong theme in the description of the sheriff's duties as detailed in the SNCC comic and its visual imagery and text. It reflects the dangerous realities of living in the Deep South for Black communities and how the comic envisioned such knowledge as key to Black survival.

Crucial to understanding the power of this comic is how it subtly shifts the balance of power in the region; that is, how it counter-maps what the county might look and feel like for marginalized communities with greater Black political participation. In these images, the sheriff is a Black man, and he is seen arresting white people, breaking up Ku Klux Klan rallies, and forming a posse of other Black men. A key piece of how this fits into a broader discussion of GIScience is how these visual images express an analysis of political power and make an alternative proposition for understanding and living in a world of under- and unserved community needs. We acknowledge that for many GIScience practitioners, it would be easy to dismiss these images as something other than GIScience, but when you place these images within a broad and evolving definition of the field, these comics express a set of geographical processes. Recall from the previous section that our modern definitions of GIScience begin from the standpoint that GIScience is about defining where things are and how they are interrelated to one another. The *Sheriff* comic book does this in two ways. First, by focusing on the most visible expression of white power in the region, SNCC expresses how the position of sheriff relates to the lives and fortunes of Black people in the region.

As the comic book continues, it focuses on the central role that local sheriffs play in the South regarding elections. The sheriff has a set of legally sanctioned duties, including listing all poll inspectors in local newspapers, giving thirty days' notice of when elections will be held, setting up

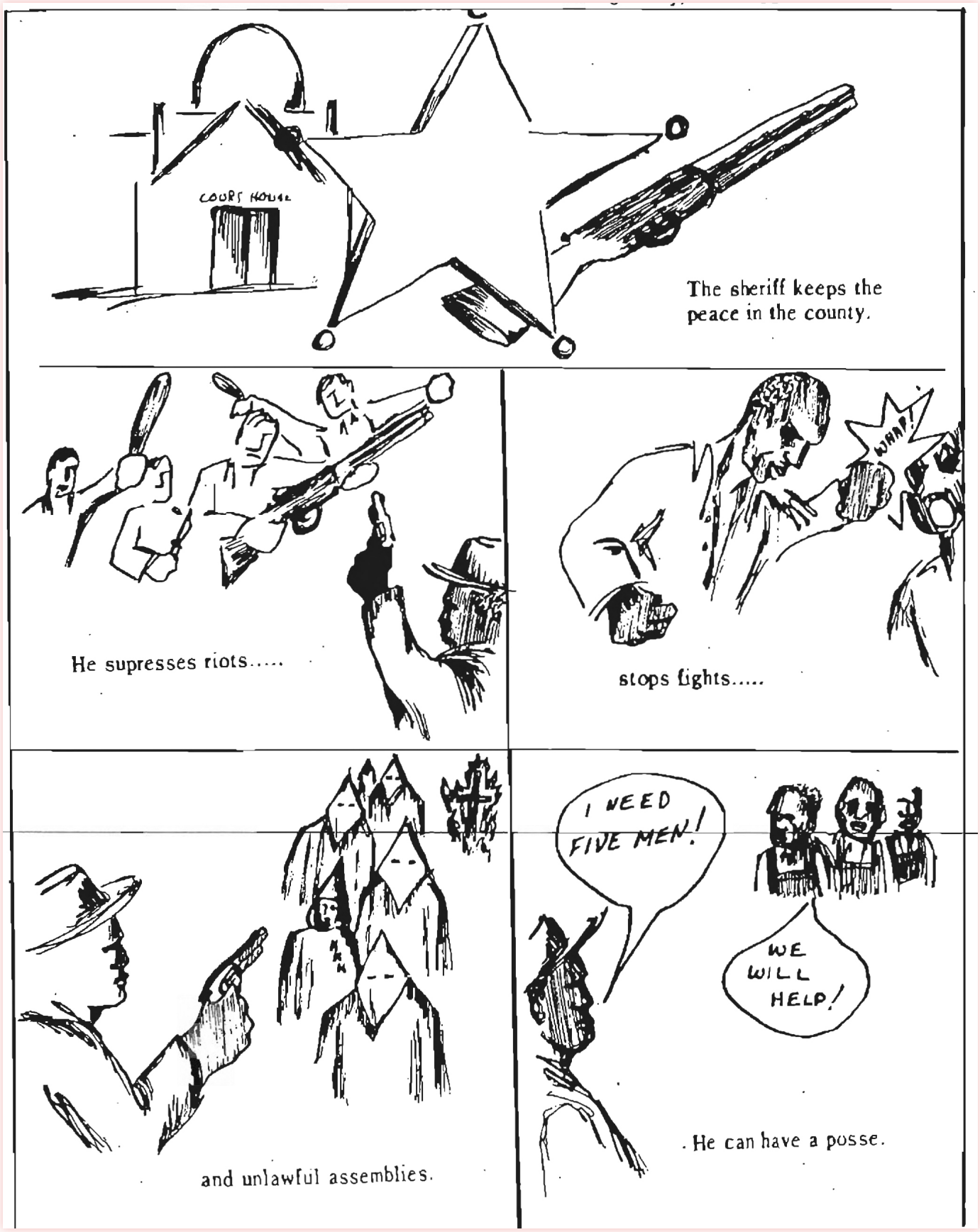

Figure 2. Page from SNCC political education comic, *Sheriff*. Created by Courtland Cox and Jennifer Lawson, 1966. Source: **https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_sheriff.pdf**.

polling places, and guarding the ballots once those votes are cast. Throughout this comic, by connecting the role of the sheriff to these prescribed political duties and then discussing how those duties relate to the lives of everyday men and women, SNCC comics represent a sophisticated political analysis of power—but expressed in ways that are relatable to a largely illiterate community of sharecroppers. A key piece of GIScience is how we visually represent data to audiences in ways that are understandable and resonant enough to tell a socially consequential story based on evidence and community needs. This can be a challenge that practitioners of GIScience are well acquainted with. For SNCC, this challenge revolved around expressing political power in digestible ways while also building political capacity to organize Southern towns and villages.

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Created in the same year as *Sheriff*, the ***Board of Education*** comic book uses several of the same strategies to create a set of methods for exerting local control over local school boards. In the first pages of the pamphlet, multiple candidates for local school boards are introduced to the reader. As the comic continues, it deploys modest but evocative drawings to explain the role of the local school board and how the board operates, including the fact that the school board is in charge of all of the schools in the county and that they have the power to spend money on schools in ways that they deem necessary. The *Board of Education* comic also explains how the school board gets money from the federal government and local and state taxes. This panel also uses a set of symbols—gas, gin bottle, property, tractor, and a license plate—to demonstrate that local people generate many of the taxes generated for the schools. In so doing, SNCC is building an important argument about the political geography of rights: since local people generate the money for the schools, they should have a say in how that money is spent. From there, the comic continues to educate readers as to how the school board replaces someone if they leave early. In one crucial text-only panel, the qualifications needed to serve on the school board are listed, including a statement in all capital letters that "YOU DO NOT HAVE TO HAVE A TEACHING CERTIFICATE" to serve on the board. Instead, the comic book explains that candidates "need to have good moral character, be known for honesty, have at least an elementary education, have a public spirit, and be committed to public education."

The most crucial page of *the Board of Education* is the final page, which depicts the power of the board to set the qualifications for, and hire, teachers (Figure 3). This was crucial in the segregated South, as white-dominated boards of education often denied teaching positions to qualified Black teachers, and would sometimes hire unqualified teachers for Black schools. The white power structure in the rural South was also concerned with cotton production, and the school board had the power to end the school year early or to reorganize the calendar such that Black kids were in the fields working while white kids remained in school. By connecting the power of the school board to life in small Southern communities, SNCC exposed how segregation was not some kind of large, faceless law but was instead enacted by myriad peoples from across the South, and how the power over Black life was actually in the hands of a select few whites. This point is emphasized by the comic's concluding line (again in all caps) "THE COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD CAN DETERMINE THE LIFE OF YOUR CHILDREN." Running through this and other political education comics is a remapping of the material wellbeing of Black communities. SNCC represented in clear terms that registering to vote and electing people of color to political office were seen as key to bringing greater fairness in the distribution of resources and opportunities to those long oppressed, and not simply the abstract exercise of civil rights.

This final sentence of the comic book speaks to another important way it constitutes a form of GIScience. Geospatial scientists and practitioners increasingly recognize that their data, technologies, maps, and knowledge creation are not merely neutral or valueless analytical tools, but can help renegotiate the terms of life for harmed communities—whether it is using data visualization to advocate for anti-eviction housing justice (Graziani and Shi 2020) or to fill the information need of humanitarian efforts following a natural disaster (Solís et al. 2021). Kwan (2007) cautions against a GIScience that is separated from an embodied and ethical engagement with practices of social life, recognizing that maps and data are always embedded within the social power of affirming or devaluing lives and life chances. SNCC's use of comics to counter-map a version of the Alabama political landscape in which Black children's lives and educations might matter more is instructive of a geospatial ethics of growing urgency today.

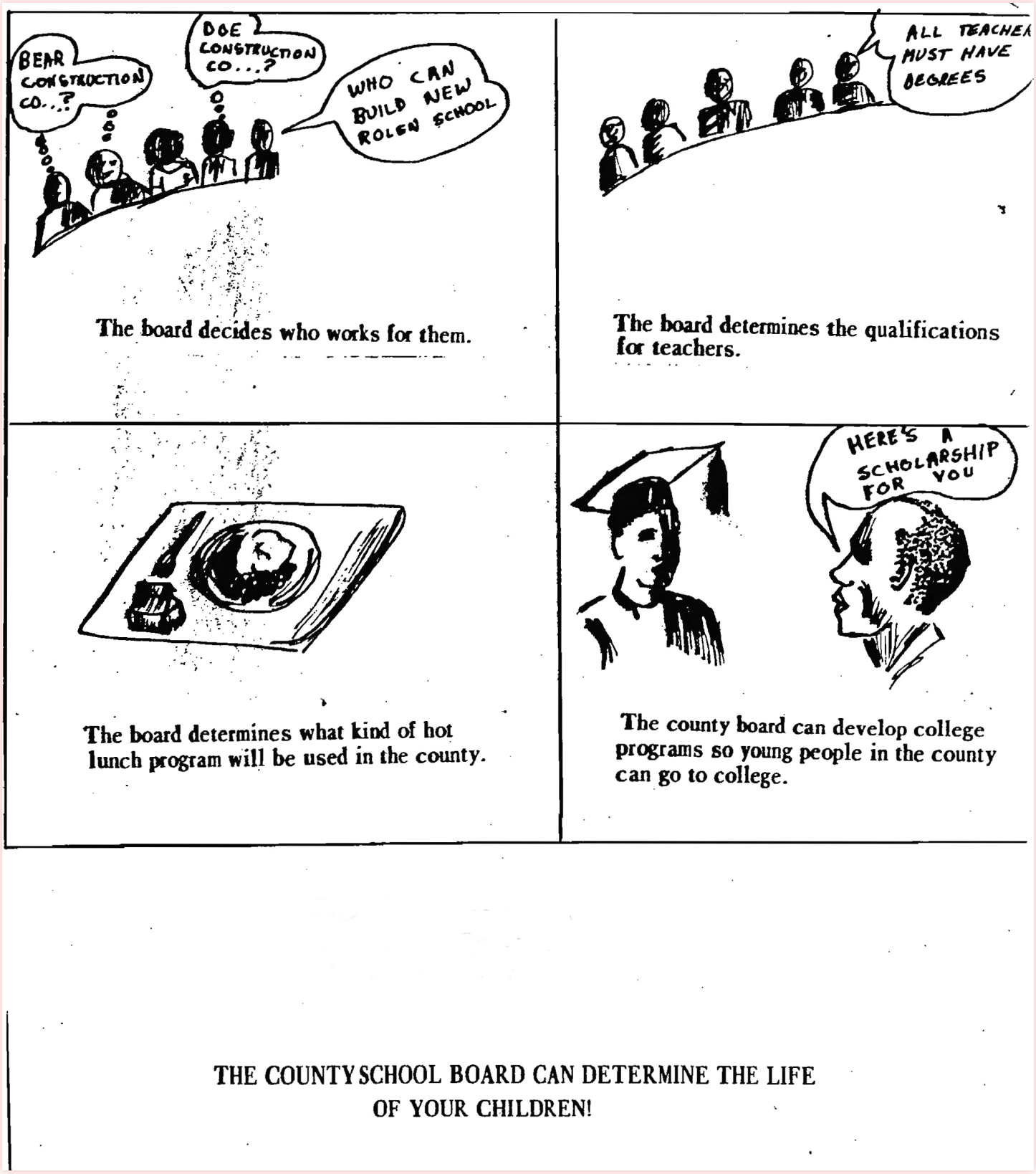

Figure 3. Page from SNCC political education comic, *Board of Education*. Created by Courtland Cox and Jennifer Lawson, 1966. Source: **https://www.crmvet.org/docs/lcfo_educ.pdf**.

SIGNIFICANCE OF COMICS

SNCC's use of comics reflects a nuanced organic intellectual understanding of the many forms that maps can take, engaging in counter-mapping practices to document those deliberately left undocumented, unprotected, and unaccounted for by the systems of power that were built on their exploitation (McKittrick 2006). Counter-mapping is not the only inclusive GIS practice in which these comics engage. They also are formed from, and in turn foster, participatory GIS (PGIS), a practice that is "focused on integrating local knowledge that is multivalent, equivocal, and often conflictual within a reductionist GIS technology" (Harris 2016, 318). PGIS seeks not to create so-called unbiased work but rather to better represent the nuances and cultural meanings of space and place, using the participation of members of the public (Harris 2016). SNCC engages with PGIS by using its members' intensely specific, local experiences in Lowndes County to create these comics, which could then be extrapolated into plans for movement and organization across the American South, which operated on much the same code of white supremacy. The power of these comics, then, is in their storytelling, which allows them to be effective counter-maps. Individual, personal, and local experiences are documented in a visual, narratively efficient way to communicate the lived experiences of those bodies of color experiencing oppression. These tactics thus engage in both PGIS in their information gathering and dissemination and counter-mapping by showing who and what is hidden. These comics remained overlooked because of the same narrow, white, Western sense of knowledge that now seeks to recognize their contributions to GIS. They did not look like "traditional" maps, which made them all the more powerful; they were both overlooked as information tools while simultaneously being what we now recognize as the most powerful combination of information dissemination, combining storytelling and visuals in a nuanced, empathetic, and sympathetic manner which created a detailed understanding of where one stood in the physical, political, and social space of the Jim Crow South.

We have suggested that SNCC's use of comics for political education represents a form of GIScience. The characterization is of greater value to us in the discipline of geography than it is for a civil rights organization already well known for its grassroots, creative, and community-centered approach to Black political mobilization and place-remaking. SNCC veterans already know how revolutionary their practices were in inspiring new generations and styles of activism still felt today. Realizing the value of SNCC for geographic academics and professionals requires recognizing and learning from the traditions of Black geographic thought and analysis that have operated parallel to, while remaining sadly unappreciated within, the formal canons of our field. Broadening what counts as GIScience to include SNCC and what some might see as their unconventional approaches to storytelling and mapping and data creation and use is about improving geospatial practices. In a field where advances in geographic knowledge are still so strongly identified with technological advances, GIScience is well served to invest in storytelling innovations to serve and communicate clearly with communities about how their lives connect in transformative ways to wider relational geographies of opportunity and disparity. We argue that these issues frame the moral and social responsibility that GIScience owes the world. It was an informational responsibility well articulated by a youth-led Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, even as many geographic scientists at the time were "secluded from, if not deaf to, the geographic imaginations, socio-political needs, and cartographic senses of marginalized communities" (Alderman and Inwood 2024, 313–14). SNCC's brand of GIScience does not represent an isolated moment, but one chapter in a broader history of Black-led counter-mapping, restorative cartographies, radical geospatial intelligence, visual storytelling, and embodied productions of geographic knowledge. We hope that this discussion can inspire more efforts not just to recognize and assimilate these geospatial traditions but to allow them to transform how GIScientists communicate, how they serve the communities in which they work, and further expand the field's possibilities beyond the academic-industrial-military complex.

Finally, thinking both within but also well outside the domain of GIScience, we believe that geographers are well served to explore the efficacy of comics as a means of translating ideas and findings into evocative visual forms and readable words that can make a decided difference to the decisions and debates happening in communities. This argument is already being made eloquently by other geographers—who as part of the creative turn in the field—have begun to recognize and articulate the legitimacy of comics as a way of distilling and translating geographic knowledge to wider audiences (Sou and Hall 2021, Sou and Hall 2023). Pushing back against traditional views that see

comics as not serious academic work, these scholars suggest that creating comics is a more democratic and participatory form of scholarship. Comics have the potential to maximize the impact and accessibility of our storytelling while also challenging dominant narratives—in public and scientific discourse—that can treat marginalized groups in reductive and dehumanizing ways. Importantly, as geographers and GIScientists explore the possibilities of comics as part of the field's tool kit, it is not a project we should do alone, without consulting and learning from freedom struggles and, in particular, SNCC's now over half-century lesson of crafting information, data, and maps that meet people where they are, and situating our science within the needs and abilities of communities.

REFERENCES

Alderman, Derek H., and Joshua Inwood. 2024. "On the living Black atlas: learning geospatial ethics from the African American freedom struggle." *The Cartographic Journal* 61: 306–14. **https://doi.org/10.1080/00087041.2023.2256131**.

Alderman, Derek H., Bethany Craig, Joshua Inwood, and Shaundra Cunningham. 2023. "The 1964 Freedom Schools as Neglected Chapter in Geography Education." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 47 (3): 411–31. **https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2022.2087056**.

Alderman, Derek, Joshua Inwood, and Ethan Bottone. 2021. "The mapping behind the movement: On recovering the critical cartographies of the African American Freedom Struggle." *Geoforum* 120: 67–78. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.01.022**.

Blaut, James. 1974. "The Ghetto as an Internal Neo-Colony." *Antipode* 6 (1): 37–41. **https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.1974.tb00617.x**.

Bledsoe, Adam, LaToya E. Eaves, and Brian Williams. 2017. "Introduction: Black Geographies in and of the United States South." *Southeastern Geographer* 57 (1): 6–11. **https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.2017.0002**.

Brookfield, Harold. 1972. *Colonialism development and independence: The case of the Melanesian islands in the South Pacific*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bryan, Joe, and Denis Wood. 2015. *Weaponizing maps: Indigenous peoples and counterinsurgency in the Americas*. New York: Guilford Publications.

Burns, Ryan. 2021. "Transgressions: Reflecting on critical GIS and digital geographies." *Digital Geography and Society* 2: 100011. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diggeo.2021.100011**.

Combs, Barbara. 2013. *From Selma to Montgomery: The long march to freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Conte, Simona, and Marta Napolillo. 2024. "GIS²: a Geographical Information System as a help against the Gender Inequality Society." womENcourage 2024, June 26–28, 2024, Madrid, Spain. **https://womencourage.acm.org/2024/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/womencourage2024-posters-final38-comprimido.pdf**.

Cope, Megan, and Sara Elwood. 2009. *Qualitative GIS: A Mixed Methods Approach*. New York: Sage Publications.

Crampton, Jeremy W. 2001. "Maps as social constructions: power, communication and visualization." *Progress in Human Geography* 25 (2): 235–252. **https://doi.org/10.1191/030913201678580494**.

———. 2015. "Collect it all: National security, big data and governance." *GeoJournal* 80: 519–531. **https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-014-9598-y**.

Crampton, Jeremy, and John Krygier. 2005. "An introduction to critical cartography." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 4 (1): 11–33. **https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v4i1.723**.

Eig, Jonathan. 2023. *King: A Life*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

Emmons, Caroline. 2018. "Selma's Bloody Sunday: Protest, Voting Rights, and the Struggle for Racial Equality by Robert A. Pratt." *Journal of Southern History* 84 (2): 517–518. **https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2018.0075**.

Finkelman, Paul. 2015. "The necessity of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the difficulty of overcoming almost a century of voting discrimination." *Louisiana Law Review* 76 (1): 181–223.

Fraser, Benjamin. 2019. *Visible cities, global comics: urban images and spatial form*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Gillespie, Deanna. 2014. "'First-Class' Citizenship Education in the Mississippi Delta, 1961–1965." *The Journal of Southern History* 80 (1): 109–142.

Ginsburg, Norton. 1973. "From colonialism to national development: geographical perspectives on patterns and policies." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 63 (1): 1–21. **https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1973.tb00900.x**.

Goodchild, Michael. 1992. "Geographical information science." *International Journal of Geographical Information Systems* 6 (1): 31–45. **https://doi.org/10.1080/02693799208901893**.

———. 2010. "Twenty years of progress: GIScience in 2010." *Journal of Spatial Information Science* 1: 3–20. **https://doi.org/10.5311/JOSIS.2010.1.2**.

Graziani, Terra, and Mary Shi. 2020. "Data for justice: tensions and lessons from the anti-eviction mapping project's work between academia and activism." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 19 (1): 397–412. **https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v19i1.1776**.

Hanchard, Mathew. 2024. *Engaging with Digital Maps: Our Knowledgeable Deferral to Rough Guides*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harley, J. B., and David Woodward. 1989. "Why cartography needs its history." *The American Cartographer* 16 (1): 5–15. **https://doi.org/10.1559/152304089783875604**.

Harris, Donald. 1972. "The black ghetto as colony: A theoretical critique and alternative formulation." *The Review of Black Political Economy* 2 (4): 3–33. **https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03040520**.

Harris, Trevor M. 2016. "From PGIS to Participatory Deep Mapping and Spatial Storytelling: An Evolving Trajectory in Community Knowledge Representation in GIS." *The Cartographic Journal* 53 (4): 318–325. **https://doi.org/10.1080/00087041.2016.1243864**.

Hatfield, Charles. 2000. *Graphic interventions: Form and argument in contemporary comics*. Hartford: University of Connecticut Press.

Hawthorne, Camilla. 2019. "Black Matters are Spatial Matters: Black Geographies for the 21st Century." *Geography Compass* 13 (11): 1–13. **https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12468**.

Inwood, Joshua F. J. 2023. "The modern infrastructure landscape and the legacy of slavery." *The Professional Geographer* 75 (1): 44–51. **https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2022.2085120**.

Inwood, Joshua, and Derek H. Alderman. 2020. "'The Care and Feeding of Power Structures': Reconceptualizing Geospatial Intelligence through the Countermapping Efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110 (3): 705–723. **https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2019.1631747**.

———. 2021. "Performing the spadework of civil rights: SNCC's free southern theater as radical place-making and epistemic justice." *GeoJournal* 87: 3719–34. **https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-021-10459-6**.

Keighren, Innes, Jeremy W. Crampton, Franklin Ginn, Scott Kirsch, Audrey Kobayashi, and Jörn Seemann. 2015. "Teaching the history of geography: Current challenges and future directions." *Progress in Human Geography* 41 (2): 245–262. **https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515575940**.

Kelley, Elleza. 2021. "'Follow the Tree Flowers': Fugitive Mapping in Beloved." *Antipode* 53 (1): 181–199. **https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12679**.

Kwan, Mei-Po. 2007. "Affecting geospatial technologies: Toward a feminist politics of emotion." *The Professional Geographer* 59 (1): 22–34. **https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9272.2007.00588.x**.

Lally, Nick. 2022. "What Can GIS Do?" *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 21 (4): 337–345. **https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v21i4.1972**.

Leeds, Anthony. 1975. "Capitalism, colonialism and war: An evolutionary perspective." In *War: its Causes and Correlates*, edited by Martin A. Nettleship and Dale Givens, 483–513. The Hague: Mouton. **https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110810523.483**.

Magdoff, Harry. 1969. *The Age of Imperialism: The Economics of US Foreign Policy.* New York: NYU Press.

Mark, David. 2003. "Geographic information science: Defining the field." In *Foundations of Geographic Information Science*, edited by Matt Duckham, Michael F. Goodchild, and Michael Worboys, 1–17. London: Taylor & Francis. **https://doi.org/10.1201/9780203009543-7**.

McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McMillen, Neil. 1994. *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954–64*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Mogel, Lize, and Alexis Bhagat, eds. 2007. *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*. Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press.

Murphree, Vanessa. 2003. "The Selling of Civil Rights: The Communication Section of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee." *Journalism History* 29 (1): 21–31. **https://doi.org/10.1080/00947679.2003.12062617**.

Nelson, T. A., M. F. Goodchild, and D. J. Wright. 2022. "Accelerating ethics, empathy, and equity in geographic information science." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119 (19): e2119967119. **https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2119967119**.

Nimoh, Suzanne. 2025. "Airing the Ungeographic: Anacostia Unmapped and Black Geographies of Gentrification in Washington, DC." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 24 (3): 260–77. **https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.aa3oem-2360**.

Ogborn, Miles. 2023. "Cedric Robinson's Black Marxism and the uses of historical geography." *Journal of Historical Geography* 82: 81–90. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2023.09.009**.

Peltier, Elian. 2024. "A graphic novel finds a relatable hero in a modern African Woman." *The New York Times.* February 10, 2024.

Perlstein, Daniel. 1990. "Teaching freedom: SNCC and the creation of the Mississippi freedom schools." *History of Education Quarterly* 30 (3): 297–324. **https://doi.org/10.2307/368691**.

Persky, Joseph. 1972. "Regional Colonialism and the Southern Economy." *Review of Radical Political Economics* 4 (5): 70–79. **https://doi.org/10.1177/048661347200400503**.

Peterle, Giada. 2015. "Teaching cartography with comics: some examples from BeccoGiallo's graphic novel series." *J-READING Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography* 69–78.

Puente, Mayra, and Veronica Vélez. 2024. "Ground-truthing as Critical Race Feminista Methodology: toward an embodied and community-centered GIS in educational inquiry." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 37: 1287–1306. **https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2024.2336479**.

Pulido, Laura. 2023. "Cultural memory, white innocence, and United States territory: the 2022 Urban Geography plenary lecture." *Urban Geography* 44 (6): 1059–1083. **https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2023.2203585**.

Roth, Robert. 2021. "Cartographic design as visual storytelling: synthesis and review of map-based narratives, genres, and tropes." *The Cartographic Journal* 58 (1): 83–114. **https://doi.org/10.1080/00087041.2019.1633103**.

Sax, Boria. 2006. "Storytelling and the 'information overload.'" *On The Horizon* 14 (4): 165–170. **https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120610708078**.

Slayton, Emma, and Jessica G. Benner. 2021. "Using Spatial Storytelling as an Approach to Teaching GIS and Spatial Literacy Skills." *Journal of Map and Geography Libraries* 16 (3): 300–316. **https://doi.org/10.1080/15420353.2021.1964673**.

Smith, Neil. 1992. "Geography, difference and the politics of scale." In *Postmodernism and the social sciences*, edited by Joe Doherty, Elspeth Graham, and Mo Malek, 57–79. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Solís, Patricia, Jennings Anderson, and Sushil Rajagopalan. 2021. "Open geospatial tools for humanitarian data creation, analysis, and learning through the global lens of Youth Mappers." *Journal of Geographical Systems* 23: 599–625. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10109-020-00339-x.

Sou, Gemma, and Sarah Marie Hall. 2021. "Communicating crisis research with comics: representation, process, and pedagogy." In *Qualitative and Digital Research in Times of Crisis: Methods, Reflexivity, and Ethics*, edited by Helen Kara and Su-ming Khoo, 93–110. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

———. 2023. "Comics and zines for creative research impact: ethics, politics and praxis in geographical research." *ACME* 22 (1): 817–41. https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v22i1.2120.

Stack, Katrina, and Derek H. Alderman. 2024. "Tent City/Freedom City geographies: Teaching beyond the 'Canon' of civil rights movement memory." *The Geography Teacher* 21 (1): 50–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/19338341.2024.2315533.

SNCC Digital Gateway. 2025a. "Political and Economic Education." Accessed July 24, 2025. https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/culture-education/political-economic-education/.

———. 2025b. "Our Voices: The Black Panther: Political Education." Accessed July 24, 2025. https://snccdigital.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Lowndes_Transcript04.pdf.

Staimpel, Saskia. 2021. "Rebellious to Revolutionary: SNCC and its Transformative Activism." *Global Africana Review* 5 (1): 38–49. https://doi.org/10.17615/vv5g-9953.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. 1965. *Mississippi: A Colony of Standard Oil and Sears, Roebuck*. https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6511_sncc_ms-colony.pdf.

Sui, Daniel. 2015. "Emerging GIS themes and the six senses of the new mind: is GIS becoming a liberation technology?" *Annals of GIS* 21 (1): 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/19475683.2014.992958.

Swann, D. 1999. "Military Applications of GIS." In *Geographical Information Systems: Principles, Techniques, Management and Applications*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, edited by Paul A. Longley, Michael F. Goodchild, David J. Maguire, and David W. Rhind, 889–99. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Taylor, Faith E., James D.A. Millington, Ezekiel Jacob, Bruce D. Malamud, and Mark Pelling. 2020. "Messy maps: Qualitative GIS representations of resilience." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 198: 103771. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2020.103771.

Tomiuc, Anamaria, Alice Iliescu, and Daniel Popescu. 2022. "Urban Comics as a Research Method and Tool in Social Innovation. Case Study: ArtiViStory Collective." *Journal of Media Research* 15 (3): 74–92. https://doi.org/10.24193/jmr.44.5.

Wood, Denis, and John Fels. 1992. *The Power of Maps*. New York: Guilford Press.

Woods, Clyde. 1998. Development arrested: The blues and plantation power in the Mississippi Delta. London: Verso Books.

Wright, Willie Jamaal. 2019. "The public is intellectual." *The Professional Geographer* 71 (1): 172–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2018.1453186.

Yessler, Reagan, and Derek Hilton Alderman. 2021. "Art as 'talking back': Louise Jefferson's life and legacy of counter-mapping." *Cartographica* 56 (2): 137–150. https://doi.org/10.3138/cart-2020-0011.

Zhao, Bo. 2022. "Humanistic GIS: Toward a research agenda." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 112 (6): 1576–1592. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2021.2004875.