Mobility as Antiracism Work: The “Hard Driving” of NASCAR's Wendell Scott

Derek H. Alderman & Joshua Inwood

To cite this article: Derek H. Alderman & Joshua Inwood (2016): Mobility as Antiracism Work: The “Hard Driving” of NASCAR's Wendell Scott, Annals of the American Association of Geographers

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2015.1118339

Published online: 09 Feb 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Mobility as Antiracism Work: The “Hard Driving” of NASCAR’s Wendell Scott

Derek H. Alderman* and Joshua Inwood†

*Department of Geography, University of Tennessee
†Department of Geography and Africana Studies Program, University of Tennessee

This article explores spatial mobility as a form of African American resistance and self-determination. We argue for examining the everyday activism and “counter-mobility work” of ordinary people of color as they move in ways that subvert, negotiate, and survive white supremacy. These ideas are developed through a historical case study not typically identified with the black civil rights struggle, specifically the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) and the “hard driving” of Wendell Scott. The first and only African American driver to win at NASCAR’s top level, Scott raced throughout the segregated South and faced considerable discrimination in what was otherwise an all-white sport. We offer a critical (re)reading of Scott’s racing career as antiracism mobility work and focus on the bodily, social, and technological practices he employed to maintain and even enhance his mobility around tracks and to and from races. Scott did not represent his efforts in terms of civil rights activism, but it is important to contextualize black resistance outside the confines of formal protest to include the struggle for survivability and material reproduction. The work of racing and driving was part of Scott’s geographically situated political practice and important to the struggle to access and move about the sport of stock car track racing and hence the larger U.S. landscape of citizenship. Our discussion has implications for analyzing historic practices of resistance but also has currency for understanding how counter-mobility practices remain central to resisting continuing racial discrimination. Key Words: Antiracism, Jim Crow, Mobility, Sport, Working class.

Este artículo explora la movilidad espacial como una forma de resistencia y autodeterminación afroamericana. Abogamos por examinar el activismo cotidiano y el “trabajo de contra-movilidad” de la gente de color ordinaria en cuanto se mueven de maneras que subvieren, concilian y sobreviven con la supremacía blanca. Estas ideas son desarrolladas por medio de un estudio de caso histórico que no se identifica típicamente con la lucha negra por los derechos civiles, específicamente relacionado con la Asociación Nacional de Carreras de Autos de Serie (NASCAR) y la “dua conducción” de Wendell Scott. Scott, primer piloto de autos afroamericano en ganar en el nivel más alto de NASCAR, único hasta ahora, compitió a través de todo el Sur segregado y enfrentó considerable discriminación en lo que por otra parte era un deporte totalmente de blancos. Ofrecemos una (re)lectura crítica de la carrera de Scott en las carreras de autos como trabajo de movilidad antirracista y nos enfocamos en las prácticas corporales, sociales y tecnológicas que utilizó para mantener e incluso mejorar su movilidad alrededor de las pistas y dentro de las competencias. Scott no representó sus esfuerzos en términos de activismo por los derechos civiles, aunque es importante contextualizar la resistencia negra fuera de los confines de la protesta formal para incluir la lucha por la sobrevivencia y la reproducción material. El trabajo de competir y conducir autos eran parte de la práctica política de Scott situada geográficamente, importante en la brega por acceder y moverse en torno del deporte de carreras de autos de serie en pista y, desde ahí, al más amplio paisaje de la
This article highlights the importance of examining the racialized geography of spatial mobility in the United States. While recognizing movement as a means of racial control and exclusion, we argue for exploring mobility as a form of African American resistance and self-determination in the face of rampant discrimination. These countermobilities have received limited analytical attention from geographers and there is a lacuna concerning the creative practices or “work” carried out by ordinary African Americans in reconstructing the meaning and material dimensions of movement as antiracist praxis. We conceive this countermobility work broadly to encompass the full range of bodily, social, and technological efforts required for working people to move in ways that subvert and survive white supremacy. This has implications for the way we understand historic practices of resistance and holds contemporary intellectual purchase as countermobility practices remain central to resisting continuing racial discrimination (Inwood, Alderman, and Williams 2015). Many of our recent senseless deaths—from Trayvon Martin to Sandra Bland—demonstrate how the policing of movement remains intertwined with a political negotiation of life and death for African Americans.

The idea of spatial mobility as antiracism work allows us to fine-tune our understanding of the politics of movement, how mobility is “enacted and experienced through the body” and the specific ways movement is practiced and made meaningful (Cresswell 2010, 20). Countermobility practices take us closer to analyzing what McKittrick (2011) called a “black sense of place” while also allowing us to remember the civil rights movement as the planned, resourceful labor of social actors and groups rather than simply the inevitable product of national progress or as a spontaneous, emotional eruption (Alderman, Kingsbury, and Dwyer 2013). This understanding connects to a burgeoning critical race theory literature that argues for a need to capture the everyday ways in which working men and women resisted systems of oppression (Kelley 1996). Focusing on these transgressive movements fashioned by working people, who are often left out of mainstream, elite-centric accounts of the civil rights struggle, illuminates deeper and sometimes counterintuitive understandings of the role of activism and resistance in the struggle for racial equality.

The inherent tensions between oppressive and resis tant geographic mobilities and the creative countermobility work practiced by African Americans are found across many social and historical settings. Our attention turns to a historical case study not typically identified with the black civil rights struggle. We explore professional stock car racing, specifically the U.S.-based National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) and the antiracist mobility work and struggles of Wendell Scott (1921–1990) of Danville, Virginia. Scott was the first and only African American driver to win a race at the top level of NASCAR. Mobilities associated with organized racing are not confined to participants traveling to and from a sporting event, but also include movement on the actual track or road course (Cidell 2014)—both of which are structured by racial power relations. This was certainly the case for Scott, who raced throughout the segregated Jim Crow South, amid the tense days of the civil rights movement and in what was otherwise an all-white sport. He faced discrimination, humiliation, and violence on and off the track. “For Wendell Scott, every race was a struggle and every struggle was about race” (Karpf 2008, np).

Sports cultures are deeply involved in reinforcing but also challenging racialized identities and inequalities (Hartmann 2012; Harrison 2013). Racism in motorsports has received limited attention from critical race theorists or mobility scholars, and the public knows little of the history of African Americans challenging white supremacy in auto racing (Miller and Simon 2010). Wendell Scott is a noteworthy exception to this forgetting of black racers, in part due to the 1977 film Greased Lightning, the penetrating biographical work of journalist Brian Donovan (2008), and Scott’s induction into various racing halls of fame. Yet, Scott’s story has been narrated in ways that do not capture the political importance of his driving. The prevailing narrative stresses that the driver “persevered” over white supremacy (rather than actively resisting it), thus limiting our understanding of exactly how working African Americans such as Scott redefined the conditions of their immobility and created countermobility (e.g., Bruce 2014). As
Marable (2006, 37) contended, reconstructing how we remember black history is “inextricably” part of the praxis necessary for reimagining a more socially just present and future.

This article represents a critical (re)reading of Wendell Scott’s racing biography, focusing on his NASCAR career as creative, working-class resistance. We suspect that for many geographers unaccustomed to critically thinking about the role of sport in the material reproduction of society, Scott’s story will be unfamiliar. For those who do know about Scott, however, there is value in conducting new and revelatory (re)readings of his life that expand our theorization of antiracist praxis and significance. Pulling heavily from the title and content of Scott’s only comprehensive biography (Donovan 2008), we focus on “hard driving” practices used to maintain and even enhance his mobility around tracks as well as to and from races. Scott employed a range of bodily, social, and technological work to make his antiracism mobility possible and, at times, competitive among faster, technologically superior race cars and better financed teams. He displayed a reticence regarding politics and seldom, if ever, discussed civil rights with other drivers or went public about racism in the sport. Although Scott did not formally identify with the civil rights movement, we argue that the very work of driving was nonetheless part of his political practice and important to the social struggle to access and move about the stock car track and hence the larger U.S. landscape of citizenship.

In revisiting the mobility biography of Scott, it is important to explore the spatially and socially contextual nature of his resistance. Like many African Americans living in the Jim Crow era, Scott employed a savvy, hybrid practice of resistance and accommodation in which he sought to create a place within a racialized sociospatial order even as he defied it. Scott practiced an oppositional politics of negotiation, survivability, and material reproduction as much as confrontation. Central was the way he used competitive movement on tracks to destabilize racist stereotypes about blacks and demonstrate that the everyday racism of stock car racing was not monolithic or complete. His career exposed the fissures and contradictions embedded within white supremacy even as it was impossible for him to escape discrimination.

Past studies in geography have demonstrated the value of contextualized or situated biographical study in developing wider theoretical insights into the construction of identity, the operation of social power, and the meaning of mobility (Myers 1998; Meindl, Alderman, and Waylen 2002; Nelson 2015). Importantly, a biographical approach is consistent with critical race theory, which asserts that the experiential knowledge of people of color is central to understanding and challenging racial inequality (Crenshaw 2011) and thus necessary for fully exploring the lives, perspectives, and struggles of people of color. By interpreting Wendell Scott’s struggle for inclusion, legitimacy, and survival within NASCAR, we use his racing career to advance broader ideas about the geography of black resistance and how it can be found in some of the most unexpected of places, culturally and politically. Scott’s biography prompts us to consider the African American resistance that lies beyond debates over formal political rights but is nevertheless crucial to cultural citizenship and justice.

Our article begins with an introduction to NASCAR and Scott. Next, we discuss important conceptual background on the linkages between spatial mobility and racialization in the United States, the idea of mobility as antiracism work, and the contextualization of working-class black resistance. We then move to the broader case study of Scott’s countermobility work, focusing on the significance of his bodily, social, and technological practices in redefining the efficacy of his movement and hence his antiracism resistance.

“‘They Didn’t Want to Use the Word Wendell’”

To explore the subaltern resistance of marginalized populations, one must go not only to places identified with tight racial control but to ones that are largely outside of the view of scholarly attention. NASCAR is one such place, recognizing that the sport’s racialized geographies extend across many locations, scales, social settings, and events—on and off the track. NASCAR was “developed primarily by and for white, working-class men” of the southeastern United States (Pierce 2010, 9). Founder and President Bill France, Sr., built the racing organization by forming alliances with segregationist politicians such as South Carolina’s Strom Thurmond and Alabama’s George Wallace, who France supported in the 1972 U.S. presidential election (Daniel 2000). France squashed two attempts to organize racers, and NASCAR continues an anti-union management style “more typical of a cotton mill than a modern, billion-dollar, professional sporting enterprise” (Pierce 2001, 9). Today, professional stock car racing has expanded beyond its southern roots, but
it remains associated with conservative, if not reactionary, racial politics and white cultural nationalism (Alderman et al. 2003; Kusz 2007). Despite ongoing investment in its “Drive for Diversity” program, NASCAR grandstands, garages, and tracks are still largely marked by reports of personal and institutional racism, and the display of racially insensitive symbols such as the Confederate battle flag is routine (Lee et al. 2010; Ryan 2014).

Since NASCAR’s inception in 1947, only a handful of black drivers have competed in its premier racing series, and Wendell Scott was the only one to compete in any significant and sustained way. In a career that included 495 races in NASCAR’s Grand National Series (the equivalent of today’s top Sprint Cup Series) from 1961 to 1973, Scott amassed one win, twenty top five finishes, and 147 top ten finishes. Before joining the Grand National Series, he won more than 120 lower division races and a Virginia state championship in 1959. Scott was an independent driver who faced significant financial difficulties borne from his working-class social position, a reality that forced Scott to race with a pit crew of family and friends and often utilizing inferior cars and scavenged parts. Although Scott loved racing, his involvement was work—in terms of both the labor and knowledge required to keep a race car running and through the material practices of resistance.

Scott obtained a NASCAR racing license in 1953 after slipping through the process and to the consternation of the association’s senior executives. Later, France would personally promise Scott fair treatment but in reality practiced a policy of “inaction and silence” that provided Scott little help in securing badly needed sponsorship or avoiding discrimination at tracks, some of which France held financial interest in (Donovan 2009). When Scott drove in his first top series race in 1961 in Spartanburg, South Carolina, track promoters decided, at the request of NASCAR, not to tell spectators that a black driver had joined the circuit and Scott was never mentioned in prerace publicity. He was introduced on race day simply as W. D. Scott in an effort to conceal his identity from knowledgeable and potentially agitated white fans. An important contrast can be made between the media publicity that U.S. professional baseball devoted to Jackie Robinson’s crossing of the color barrier and the lack of acknowledgment given to Scott. Baseball’s extensive media coverage “helped to hold the sport’s leaders accountable for how Robinson was treated,” whereas Scott was left in a more vulnerable position (Donovan 2008, 83).

A racing license did not keep NASCAR officials from tying up Scott at prerace inspections, refusing to award him a rookie of the year award, or banning him from certain tracks. Darlington Raceway’s Bob Colvin would not allow Scott to race on his South Carolina track until 1965, when forced by the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Darlington’s marquee race, the Southern 500, was promoted as a “defiant tribute to the Old South” and “Darlington was NASCAR’s only track to use the Confederate flag, instead of a green flag, to start its races.” Colvin allegedly said that if a black man ever won the Southern 500, the driver would “never make it to victory lane” (Donovan 2008, 100). After Scott’s first race at Darlington, Colvin refused to pay him money normally given to unsponsored drivers and openly called him a “nigger” (Donovan 2008, 155). Racial slurs were hurled at Scott when he raced, although over time he built a popular following among many white fans and drivers as the proverbial underdog. Other racers were violent, especially early in Scott’s career when he proved competitive, and the threat of being intentionally wrecked and hurt by fellow drivers was an ever present danger.

Perhaps no event better illustrates the institutional discrimination that Scott faced than his sole Grand National win in December 1963—less than five months after the March on Washington. Racing at Jacksonville, Florida, Scott beat his nearest competitor by two laps but was not recognized as the winner. The second-place driver, Buck Baker, was declared the victor. Race promoters were supposedly apprehensive about how fans in attendance would react to Scott kissing the white beauty queen, a tradition at NASCAR races. Two hours after the end of the race and the departure of the crowds, race officials declared Scott the winner, but they had no suitable trophy because the official one had been given to Baker (Karpf 2008). It would not be until 2010, twenty years after Scott’s death and forty-seven years after the Jacksonville race, that NASCAR would award a trophy to his family.

Even after the victory in Jacksonville, sponsorship and factory backing from the automobile industry continued to elude Scott, despite receiving recommendations from prominent white and black people in racing and business circles. Ironically, in excluding Scott, potential sponsors cited the fact that he was banned from certain tracks, such as Darlington, and they feared potentially being drawn into “taking sides in a
discrimination dispute” (Donovan 2008, 142). When Ford’s executives finally gave him a race car, it was not a current model and had to be repaired. The auto manufacturer publicly hid its relationship with Scott (Smydra 2004). He continued to build race cars in his modest backyard garage while race teams and shops became larger, better financed, and more technologically sophisticated. Despite these obstacles, Scott remained competitive, consistently finishing in the top ten in point standings in the latter half of the 1960s.

The 1970s signaled a significant downturn for the African American racer. His relations with NASCAR soured further when he joined a major driver boycott of the Talladega, Alabama, Speedway’s inaugural race in protest of unsafe driving conditions. Talladega also signaled an important transition from racing on dirt tracks to paved speedways where the inferiority of his cars became more apparent. Wishing to be more competitive, Scott borrowed heavily to purchase a Mercury and equip it with a state-of-the-art, custom-made engine. In 1973, Scott raced the Mercury for the first and last time at the notoriously fast and dangerous Talladega track, where a wreck totaled the new vehicle and caused him serious injuries. Financial difficulties forced his retirement that same year (Donovan 2008).

The stock car racing industry is now more likely to use the word “Wendell” than when Scott first began driving. He was inducted into the International Motor Sports Hall of Fame in 1999 and into the NASCAR Hall of Fame in 2015 (DanvilleVAGov 2015). The recent NASCAR induction came amid growing public pressure and the sport’s ongoing efforts to rehabilitate its racist image, for marketing purposes if not for socially progressive reasons. Although Scott’s story is remarkable, it is also significant in that it is unexceptional. Although the stock car trailblazer’s story is apart from the ordinary black experience, he is also recognizably part of the broader history of everyday struggles and strides made by working-class African Americans in claiming and redefining the terms of their mobility and life chances.

Scott’s larger mobility biography is one of not just challenging the color line in racing but moving in broader transgressive ways. In Danville, a young Scott often raced his bicycle against white children (Chamberlain 2015). Later, following the path of many early NASCAR drivers (Thompson 2006), he built and ran fast cars to transport moonshine (illegal liquor). He also drove a taxi, which offered some limited freedom from Virginia’s system of racial apartheid and allowed him to interact with whites in a less deferential manner than normally dictated by the era (Donovan 2008). It was Scott’s speeding tickets as a taxi driver and ability to avoid arrest on moonshine runs that caught the attention of the Dixie racing circuit, an early competitor to NASCAR. Seeking to draw more spectators, promoters came up with what they saw as a gimmick of pitting a black driver against a field of white racers. What might have started as a Jim Crow practice of stereotyping African Americans for entertainment quickly became an opportunity for Scott to redefine his social status; he won his first race less than a month after joining the circuit (Donovan 2008).

Essential to Scott’s story and his resistance is how we interpret him in relation to geographic mobility, and specifically countermobility. As an extension of the larger society, NASCAR sought to sustain white supremacy by restricting the movement of African Americans on tracks and enforcing the idea that being a major league driver was a livelihood and cultural identity reserved exclusively for whites. These practices mirrored larger efforts in the U.S. South to contain the growing African American freedom movements. Thus, Scott’s racing career challenged the broader historical production of black immobility in the United States.

Racialization of Mobility

The themes of spatial mobility, movement, and transportation are underanalyzed avenues for exploring the African American civil rights struggle (but see Henderson 2006; Golub, Marcantonio, and Sanchez 2013). The politics of creating and maintaining racial separation and inequality are complicated and, for the most part, geographers have focused on the creation of racialized identity and the production of place and landscape (e.g., Schein 2006). No less important, however, is the racialization of movement, how the “right to mobility” is “fundamentally intertwined with the construction of racial identities” (Hague 2010, 331). U.S. culture has perpetuated a normative association between whiteness and mobility and the depiction of nonwhite movement in negative and even dangerous terms (Hague 2010). According to Mitchell (2000, 258), the social reification of racial differences and disparities is accomplished by “ordering and controlling the movement (and “travel”) of people” as well as an ordering and controlling space and spatial boundaries. Access to mobility and its accompanying opportunities is not socially neutral but historically embedded within
the unequal distribution of rights and racialized hierarchies of power, including white supremacy (Seiler 2007). In other words, movement in the United States is always geographical and is always racialized.

Mobility, according to Cresswell (2010, 21), is a “resource that is differentially accessed.” He added that the politics of race and the politics of mobility are “joined at the hip” in the United States (Cresswell 2008, 134). Understanding racial inequalities requires the development of a racialization framework that pays attention to the historical restriction and regulation of black movement—beginning with enslavement and continuing through the use of vagrancy laws, lynching, and segregated facilities during the Jim Crow era and now with our far from colorblind system of mass incarceration and hypermilitarized policing of urban America. As Cresswell (2006, 739), noted, “Some mobilities depend on the relative immobility of others,” and ensuring the free movement of white America has often required, consciously or unconsciously, the immobilizing of African Americans—whether it was mid-twentieth-century federally funded highway development demolishing black neighborhoods or the ongoing divestment of public transit systems to subsidize car travel and the “spatial secession” of white middle and upper class families to ever expanding suburbs (Henderson 2006). According to Lipsitz (2011), “The strong desire to move freely across space formed an important part of the Black spatial imaginary, but it has rarely been easy to translate those hopes of moving freely with the ability to actually do so for African Americans” (66).

Yet, oppressive systems give rise to resistance. As McKittrick (2011) contended, a social science that does not take resistance seriously runs the risk of naturalizing the displacement of African Americans and has the effect of erasing and foreclosing the emancipatory potential and human experiences of black resistance to oppression. Thus, a racialized perspective must recognize that people of color not only challenge racial control by seeking to move on their own terms but are engaged in a complex relationship with oppression. For these reasons we use two terms to discuss mobility. The first, black mobility, refers to the range of movement-controlling practices that are reflected in the production of white supremacy and that were central to the exercise of segregation in the Jim Crow South and that fundamentally structured life for Scott. The second term, antiracism mobility, refers to the strategies Scott employed to resist segregation and the restrictions of black mobility. Antiracism mobility refers to the meaningful countermobilities that subvert racism and that have long served as an important political organizing strategy for African Americans—from escaping slavery to the postemancipation Great Migration out of the South, from the freedom rides of the civil rights movement to more recent transportation justice campaigns (Alderman, Kingsbury, and Dwyer 2013).

Despite the recognition of the importance of black mobility struggles in the United States, there remains within geography specifically, but also the social sciences more generally, an underappreciation of the terrains on which these resistant movements take place. Especially neglected have been those moments beyond overt protest, when people of color have moved in transgressive ways in the struggle to survive. In other words, there is not only a need to “recover and explore aspects of black working-class life and politics that have been relegated to the margins” but a concomitant need to focus on the anti-racism “counter-mobility work” of ordinary African Americans in an effort to provide new and varied understandings of “the strategies of resistance and survival” (Kelley 1996, 4).

The Work of Antiracism Mobility

Important in developing a racialization of mobility framework, as well as understanding the gravity of Scott’s story, is to understand black geographies beyond simply drawing distinctions between oppressive and resistant modes of movement without exploring how these mobilities are fashioned. Cresswell (2010) mirrored this argument, calling on scholars to break down the binary of mobility–immobility into an understanding of the specific aspects or practices of moving and how they take on political importance. Exploring the alternative mobilities constructed by immigrant drivers in contemporary Atlanta, Stuesse and Coleman (2014) identified the creative strategies, assessments, and use of technology employed by communities of color to evade unfair policing of their driving and efforts to isolate them economically and socially.

We suggest a similar approach, one that pays attention to the practices that blacks have actively fashioned and employed to transform their geographic immobility (or controlled mobility) into movement that subverts white supremacy and embodies antiracism. We seek to move this perspective forward by suggesting that the social construction and contestation of mobility is a matter of work. Even the relatively free movement of people and things requires decision making, coordination, and an accomplishment of tasks—“mobility work”
Important to Scott’s story is how black antiracism mobilities come in different political forms and that this countermobility illustrates the complicated geographies of resistance in which the automobile and driving are central. Scott saw the automobile as symbol of freedom and self-determination, but he did not necessarily see it as a tool of formal protest. Conversely, he did not drive to avoid harassment from whites or circumvent discrimination. Scott complicates our understanding of resistance by fashioning an antiracism mobility in which he challenged white supremacy in NASCAR by simultaneously racing with and against a sport that would have preferred that he disappear from the track. The complexity of Scott’s political engagement and the meaning of his driving practices prompt us to problematize some of our dominant conceptions of black resistance.

**Contextualizing Black Resistance and Survivability**

To fully contextualize Wendell Scott’s antiracism mobility, one must recognize the relationship between resistance and accommodation. African American resistance to white supremacy comes in many forms—from the overt to the covert and sometimes even the unwitting (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Kelley (1993, 78) challenged the idea that the “political hinges on whether or not groups are involved in elections, political parties, grass-roots social movements.” Focusing on black working-class life in the Jim Crow South, Kelley called for an analysis of those daily, often hidden forms of black resistance and survival that not only informed but served as foundations for organized political movement. Similarly, Domosh (1998) explored how African American women manipulated their mobility on the streets of nineteenth-century New York City, recognizing that “tactical” and transgressive everyday acts and decisions previously characterized as apolitical can actually have important political implications. According to her, transgressive spatial practices are contextually situated and interpreted; that is, their meanings are defined in light of the social and spatial context within which they emerge.

Scott’s story illustrates that rather than being polar opposites, black resistance and accommodation are dialectical, thus giving “us a far richer and more nuanced picture of social life” (Weitz 2001, 670). The reality is that resistance and accommodation are
intertwined and each was pursued differently depending on the geographical context at hand and the manner and extent of the opposition faced. Introducing the concept of “differential racialization,” Pulido (2002, 765) suggested that “specific forms of oppression and exploitation result in particular types of racial and revolutionary politics” depending on how racism is lived out and experienced within unique historical and spatial experiences. Consequently, what constitutes black resistance must be interpreted in relation to the position of African Americans within a local racial order.

With Scott’s brand of resistance, it is important to understand that he was a lone African American driver operating in a region, time, and sport in which white supremacy was not only harsh but could quickly turn violent. Scott’s everyday acts of traveling to unfamiliar, segregated towns and racing on unfriendly tracks, although not appearing as radical mobility politics, nonetheless speak to how he navigated such a complex terrain. That he survived is testament to his antiracism mobility practices.

In contextualizing Scott’s antiracism mobility practices, it is important to understand how survival and resiliency are interrelated tools in challenging white supremacy. For African Americans in the Jim Crow era, accommodation and survival could be read as oppositional strategies or techniques for navigating racism rather than simply the acceptance of oppression, a means of resisting one’s unjust conditions without seeming to do so (Litwack 1998). Suggesting that geographers have tended to take human survival for granted, Heynen (2009) defined the “right to survive” as a radical political action and reflected on the everyday politics of social reproduction within the African American community. The struggle to survive is a bodily act and black resistance is grounded in meeting the material conditions of the body within an unjust and life-threatening socioeconomic system.

Gilbert (1998) talked about survival in the context of the racial politics of mobility. She argued that the idea of (im)mobility in and of itself is not necessarily helpful in fully capturing the spatialities of everyday life or understanding the level of power or powerlessness experienced by the working poor. Rather, mobility or immobility is made meaningful and hence mitigated based on the survival strategies people employ, recognizing that this struggle for survivability is directly shaped by individual and institutionalized racism. Gilbert (1998, 599) saw a creative agency among working people of color; that survival, rather than a passive condition, is something strategically fashioned through “everyday decisions and practices . . . to ensure the economic and emotional well-being of themselves and their families.” Placing survivability in a critical political context not only allows us to heed McKittrick’s (2011, 958) call not to “re-isolate the dispossessed” but situates African American suffering and opposition within a broader relational understanding of human life and racialized spaces of encounter that is central to understanding antiracist praxis.

To discuss survivability in the context of professional stock car racing might strike some readers as unusual, but such a perspective flattens out differences among people of color while minimizing the dangers that Wendell Scott faced in NASCAR as he sought to move in ways that called into question white control of the sport. As noted, it was not uncommon for Scott’s white competitors to knock him out of races and there were numerous instances of fans and drivers threatening violence at raceways. Given the particular violent politics of the U.S. South and the prevalence of lynching, it was a threat not to be taken lightly, and African Americans had long taught themselves and their children how to survive and subvert this violence (Litwack 1998).

Scott’s son Frank, who worked in his father’s pit crew, recounted the violence faced at race tracks: “When he [Scott] planned to go to Atlanta, he . . . received death threats. Daddy said, ‘Look, if I leave in a pine box, that’s what I gotta do. But I’m gonna race’” (National Public Radio 2015). On more than one occasion, Atlanta was important in reminding Scott of how white supremacy and segregation threatened his survivability on the racetrack. He first raced in the city in 1955, during his minor league days, and witnessed something that stayed in his mind for the rest of his career. Scott retold the event:

That Sunday they [Atlanta track officials] wouldn’t let me go on the track to practice until the ambulance from the black funeral home got there. They had a white ambulance for the white drivers, and they had one ambulance for me. That Sunday they had a terrible wreck and a boy got hurt real bad. The guys in the white ambulance had been running the radio and the battery was dead. They had to use the black ambulance to take him to the hospital. I often wondered, if I had a wreck and the black ambulance wouldn’t start, would they have taken me in the white ambulance? They probably would’ve let me lay there and die, back in them days. (Wilkinson 1983, 118–19; Donovan 2008, 73)
Scott saw an increase in racial tension and white hostility toward him at NASCAR tracks in 1963, a pivotal year in the civil rights movement. A white mob confronted Scott and his family at a Hillsborough, North Carolina, track. He quickly had to leave after a race in Birmingham, Alabama, when an angry crowd planned to turn his car over and burn it (Donovan 2008). Scott had only one car to race at a time and it was imperative to keep that vehicle functioning so that he could race another day. Sponsored drivers could have multiple cars at their disposal and some, such as Jack Smith of Georgia, used this fact in threatening to wreck Scott. When Scott set the fastest qualifying time at the Savannah Speedway in July 1962, Smith allegedly told him: “I got five of these Pontiacs [race cars], all alike, and when they drop the green flag, I’m going to stick this one clean up your ass” (Donovan 2008, 109).

The comments of Jack Smith represented a threat not only to Scott’s physical safety but also to his ability to materially reproduce himself and his large family. Making a living was difficult for the African American driver, who also worked as a full-time automobile mechanic in Danville and continued to bootleg moonshine to supplement his income. Having repeatedly borrowed against his home mortgage, Scott stayed in heavy debt to remain in racing and every day he faced the prospect of not being able to compete in NASCAR. To have competed at such a high level for so long and over so many races represents, in his own way, an articulation of the right to survive materially and bodily.

An important part of Scott’s resistant survivability was the way in which he exerted agency over his own geographic mobility and how he used his movement to counter and negotiate the racist ways in which the race track was constructed and realized as a white place. For the remainder of the article, we identify the specific countermobility practices that Scott employed through his daily work to compete in NASCAR, exercise his right to survive, and hence resist being excluded from racing.

Scott’s Hard Driving Practices and Antiracism Mobility Work

For the African American experience, with its history of white control of black bodies, it is especially important to understand what practices underpinned the struggle against black (im)mobility. Given that Scott is known for his success in driving under adverse conditions, it is surprising that there is limited public discussion of exactly how he resourcefully navigated racist landscapes and the array of bodily, social, and technological work practices that allowed him to survive and subvert racism in NASCAR.

Bodily Work Practices

Scott’s resiliency and competiveness in stock car racing was a product of how he bodily interacted with and mastered the track and the car engine, as well as how he negotiated his own body and those of others to expose and take advantage of the incongruities and inconsistencies in U.S. white supremacy. In terms of exploring his embodied interaction with the automobile, it is important to note that NASCAR raced on dirt tracks throughout much of Scott’s career and that he practiced an effective power slide technique on such tracks. This technique required Scott to place the steering wheel firmly against his chest and make violent jerks with the wheel to negotiate the tight turns of tracks and outmaneuver opponents (Harris-Holley and Karpf 2011). Such racing relied on the reflexes, strength, and endurance of drivers rather than simply driving cars at high speeds. Scott did this type of “hard driving” while suffering from debilitating, stress-induced stomach ulcers, which would cause vomiting and severe cramps (Donovan 2008).

Racing took great bodily control on the track, but driving in NASCAR for Scott also required careful embodied practices of work off the track. Scott avoided and was usually not forced to engage in physical confrontation with angry competitors or fans. Throughout his early career, Scott was accompanied to races by white friends and former racing competitors Buck Drummond and Earl Brooks, who intervened during moments of racial tension. Chamberlain (2015) reconstructed such a moment:

Scott won a race, besting a white driver named Ward McDonald. McDonald was furious to lose to a Black man and smashed his car into Wendell’s, eventually pushing him into the infield. McDonald began climbing out of his car, ready to attack Wendell. Scott knew that he couldn’t fight a white driver in front of a racially hostile audience. Earl Brooks ran over to McDonald’s car, pulled him out and beat him up, saving Scott from a difficult predicament.

Although often unacknowledged by mainstream readings of the civil rights struggle, a small number of white allies stepped forward during the movement to
provide financial assistance, political cover, or other forms of support for African Americans in segregated society (Brown 2002). Chappell (1996) noted that throughout the history of the U.S. South and despite the rhetoric of ardent segregationists, resistance to civil rights was not monolithic and a complex web of social relations existed between blacks and whites. By taking advantage of this reality, Scott displayed a complex understanding of the social and political realities of white supremacy and was able to leverage these realities to maneuver on and off the track. For Scott, the few whites who would work with him realized that surviving and competing within a racist NASCAR required that Wendell could not be involved in bodily violence for fear of the white mob and loss of credibility in the eyes of the broader public. Scott's "bodyguards" speak not only to the strategic alliances that Scott established with some members of the white community but also to the ways in which survivability is always dependent on the forging of coalitions. Scott's coalition-building work with family, friends, and some whites provided the breathing space needed to ensure his spatial mobility on and off the track, as well as the impossibility of the idea that white supremacy was complete in separating and pitting whites and blacks against each other.

No matter how many white supporters Scott had, the reality is that he lived at a time and in a region where his bodily existence was threatened by violent white supremacists. At times this forced Scott to engage in practices and racial politics that put him in a compromising position. On a few occasions, Scott even took advantage of his own bodily characteristics—specifically his lighter skin—to navigate through harsh conditions, although he never denied that he was an African American to a track owner or NASCAR official. The idea of "passing" is controversial and speaks to broad cleavages within the African American community that have long correlated light of the specific racial order of stock car racing. Specifically, he practiced a creative mixture of self-defense and tactical avoidance that prompts us to consider the dialectical nature of resistance and accommodation.

Donovan (2008) described a situation in which Scott needed the help of a garage while traveling home from a race but, like many black motorists, found service stations that would accommodate only whites. Scott wore a cap over his head and posed as the white boss of a black race crew to receive help and make it home safely. He went as far as referring to his crew, which included his own sons, as "niggers" to convince the garage owner of his supposed whiteness. Scott's passing for a cruel white person, which he later described as heartbreaking, not only demonstrates how the driver creatively turned Jim Crow's racial politics of the body against itself but also unmasked the illegitimacy of whiteness as an objective racial identity and thus exposed it as a socially constructed point of superiority and privilege. This is indicative of what Du Bois ([1903] 1994) described as "double consciousness," the process of dislocation that comes from being "an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (2). The story of Scott having not only to "pass" but to engage in racist rhetoric speaks to what Inwood (2009, 490) described as the "dual sense of not belonging" that forms the spatial dislocations of being black and having to participate in a normative society determined to keep African Americans in their place. Critically, this experience "creates a realm of geographic possibilities and imaginations" (Inwood 2009, 490) that African Americans were able to draw from to create the very foundation of survivability in the face of white supremacy. Perhaps more poignant, this story recalls how many African Americans in the U.S. South were often placed in a position of having to engage in practices that compromised their racialized position in society.

Social Work Practices

Underlying Scott's bodily enactments and antiracism mobility work was a savviness in managing what could be tense social relations on and around the NASCAR track. Scott responded to white opponents with different strategies of resistance, realizing that certain oppositional actions were possible (and some were not) in light of the specific racial order of stock car racing. Specifically, he practiced a creative mixture of self-defense and tactical avoidance that prompts us to consider the dialectical nature of resistance and accommodation.

There were instances when Scott engaged in self-defense as part of his politics of survivability. Because of the harassment and violence that greeted black motorists on the road during Jim Crow, Scott rarely traveled to races alone and he drove to tracks with a pistol under his seat, which was not that uncommon among African American travelers at the time. Although it is true that Scott would not rush to
participate in overt confrontations with whites, he did not shy away from defending his family when they faced racialized violence at a track. Twice during the 1965 season, Scott confronted groups of white men who were terrorizing his teenage sons. At a North Carolina speedway, angry spectators threatened to castrate his sons. In both cases, a screaming and cursing Scott promised to kill the offenders without hesitation, which worked to defuse the situation (Donovan 2008). One of Scott’s greatest opponents was fellow driver Jack Smith, who was strongly opposed to black participation in NASCAR. In the 1962 season, Smith repeatedly wrecked, spun out, and crowded Scott on the track. Finally, in Valdosta, Georgia, Scott pointed a loaded gun at Smith while they were both in cars running pace laps on the track. Later, in Hickory, North Carolina, Scott threatened to kill Smith if he ever intentionally hit his car again. No more trouble was had from Smith (Chamberlain 2015).

Self-defense could find its way onto the track, but Scott most often approached stressed social relations with fellow drivers by employing a strategy of tactical avoidance. We say “tactical avoidance” to capture the idea that nonconfrontation, or even accommodation, is not simply the acceptance of racism but has the potential to become a form of resistance when used in strategic ways. Knowing that NASCAR would pounce on any opportunity to ban Scott from the circuit and thus end his racing career, he seldom carried out the kind of threat made to Jack Smith. Instead, the African American driver produced a creative countermobility in which he drove hard and competitively while also practicing nonaggression on the track—working daily to strike a remarkable and delicate social balance. He would outcompete white drivers but not wreck them and, as a rule, he would not retaliate against a white driver who had wrecked him. This strategy not only ensured that he would not be penalized by NASCAR officials but also worked to build sympathy and support among some white fans and drivers who witnessed the discrimination that Scott faced. In effect, Scott socially fashioned his brand of racing in nonviolent ways, which made it possible to create a countermobility that exposed the brutality and immorality of racism, the potential fissures in the hegemony of white supremacy, as well as ensuring his own physical and survival on the track.

Sadly, the use of tactical avoidance, shaped by the necessity of having to survive white supremacy, worked against his efforts to attract and garner the limited amount of sponsorship available to him. Early in Scott’s NASCAR career, before reaching the top racing series, he drove for a team owned by a white trucking executive named Monroe Shook. Scott hoped that the relationship with Shook would lead to a sponsored ride in the elite Grand National circuit, but he needed a win at Virginia’s South Boston Speedway. South Boston was a close contest between Scott and the white race leader, Gip Gibson. Concerned about spectators getting ugly and turning on him, Scott refused to “put aside his long-standing practice of avoiding deliberate contact” and nudge Gibson’s car out of the way, which was often done by white drivers. Moreover, when Gibson’s car came to a stop on the track, Scott was not willing to overtake his opponent and hence he came in second. “The incident cost Scott the confidence of Monroe Shook,” who angrily fired his African American driver and removed any possibility of securing a competitive, sponsored Grand National car (Donovan 2008, 83). This story highlights the catch-22 of a black man racing in a white supremacist sport. Scott was expected to follow the same aggressive competitive driving practices as his white counterparts, but racing that way would most assuredly cause a public backlash and further increase his vulnerability to being wrecked, making him unable to compete for top finishes and financial backing. It is in this complex “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” world in which Scott had to make key social decisions that would ensure his immediate mobility but that hurt his future competitiveness and success. The driver who Shook eventually chose to sponsor won two NASCAR season championships. This is a much more nuanced examination of how racism in NASCAR operated and constrained Scott. As his dilemma illustrates, black resistance is an uneven and negotiated process and shaped by a politics of possibility within a geographically defined, local racial order. The power of white supremacy is not just in how it directly controls or oppresses people of color but also in how just the potential threat of racism limits activism and confrontation with whites.

Technological Work Practices

Important to Scott’s antiracism mobility work and survivability were the technological efforts he performed. He was a master, self-taught mechanic known for innovation and improvisation with equipment. Friend Earl Brooks recalls that Scott used baby scales to measure parts, whereas other teams had the luxury
of highly calibrated equipment (Smydra 2004). Contemporaries also retell stories of how Scott, who often served as both driver and mechanic during races, would jump out of his car at pit stops and perform repairs. Charlotte Observer racing writer Tom Higgins reflected on Scott’s technical prowess as well as how this mobility work was always made in the context of the politics of ensuring material reproduction.

I saw his [Scott’s] car break suspension at Charlotte [race track] one time. He pulled it [the car] behind the pit wall, got out, and repaired the thing by himself. . . . After the race, I asked, “Wendell, why did you bust your fanny like that to just get back in the race?” He told me, “One more position [at the finish line] might be the difference next week in whether I sleep in a motel or in my truck.” (DanvilleVAGov 2015)

It is worth noting that the issue of where Scott finished the race did not simply determine the quality of next week’s accommodations but directly affected his safety on the road as African Americans had to be very cautious about when and where they traveled in the face of hostile communities and hypervigilant policing. A black man sleeping in a truck in a strange place could be dangerous in addition to uncomfortable.

Scott’s antiracism mobility was not just a matter of working on technology but working with technology in establishing an embodied relationship with his automobile equipment. In doing so, he created what Dant (2004) called an “assemblage” between car and driver that together brought about a social action and capacity to move greater than the sum of the two (Dant 2004). Recognizing the ability of black bodies to engage in such assemblages or hybrid relationships with technology and to transform these relationships into sites of antiracism offers a picture of resistance as a set of sophisticated practices, subjectivities, and connections with material objects. Such recognition moves our understanding of antiracist activism beyond simply the physicality of marches, protests, sit-ins, and boycotts. Scott appeared to be deeply “in touch” with his race cars and he was known for tasting hot motor oil and testing spark plugs by hand to detect equipment problems. A close mechanical relationship between driver and car was not uncommon in the early days of NASCAR, but it was especially critical to Scott’s material reproduction and hence the antiracism praxis of his survivability. It was important for him to have a well-functioning car to pay creditors at home or just to have enough money to travel back home after a race.

An important part of Scott’s antiracism mobility practice was the assemblage between him, the race car, and the track itself; indeed, stock car racing is about managing and constantly adjusting, on a mechanical level, the relationship among the three. Perhaps the Jacksonville win in 1963 is one of the best examples of how the work of recalibrating this car–driver–track assemblage helped keep Scott mobile and competitive on the race track. Recent rain had caused the Florida track to have severe bumps and ruts, which caused many of the drivers to bounce, break axles and wheels, and lose traction. To adapt to the track, improve the car’s suspension, as well as play to his racing style, Scott made the drastic decision of removing one of the two shock absorbers at each corner of the car, allowing him to outrun faster, factory-backed race cars. In this case, driving hard was not simply about enduring the difficult track but making important decisions that allowed Scott to make the race more about handling rather than speed. On average, sponsored race cars ran ten to fifteen miles per hour faster than Scott’s car, and squeezing performance from inferior cars was important to his hard driving (Donovan 2008).

Scott’s technological work included quickly repairing cars and rebuilding engines in alleys and parking lots and amid hostile prerace inspections. Scott and his sons would scour tracks after races for used parts and tires, even eating some of the food not finished by race teams. He also benefited from used parts given by sympathetic drivers and crew chiefs (Harris-Holley and Karpf 2011). Scott used this support and his own entrepreneurialism in combing through junkyards and trading for parts to survive and at times do well, especially on short tracks where horsepower mattered less. It was clear that he was outmatched, though, when compared to sponsored drivers.

Because of the inferior power of his equipment, Scott’s antiracism mobility in NASCAR had to be resourceful and well planned. He made strategic decisions about how hard to race his car when driving against especially fast, superior cars. Sometimes Scott ran more cautiously or less competitively in preliminary races leading up to the feature races to minimize car damage or to position himself to run in consolation races to make more prize money. Whereas other drivers could run hard the entire race and run the risk of wrecking or blowing an engine, Scott did not have that luxury. Scott’s son, Wendell, Jr., remembered how the politics of survivability and material reproduction directly shaped his father’s approach to racing and how he meticulously scrutinized the competition...
in relation to his own car. By necessity, Scott was focused on finishing in the top ten more so than racing “full out” for a win. According to Wendell, Jr., “Top ten meant the light bill got paid or my third or fourth sister was going to get new shoes. That’s the Wendell Scott story” (Karpf 2008).

As part of his mobility work, Scott found himself in the difficult day-to-day position of making decisions about when to push the mechanical performance of his cars in the face of the severe economic inequalities that faced him as lone, black driver with no sponsorship. These decisions were important and gut-wrenching livelihood calculations, which reflect the complex relationship that the black driver had with his car. Although Scott’s technological–economic calculations kept him moving and racing, they probably resulted in far fewer wins than he was capable of, thus further hurting his chances for sponsorship and for securing a more competitive ride, mechanically and financially.

Concluding Remarks

Geographers have yet to take on a full treatment of the African American civil rights struggle, and any effort to do so must address the role of spatial mobility within the struggles for social justice and, in particular, the rich if not fully understood story of working-class mobility struggles. The point of our article has not been to recast Wendell Scott as a civil rights activist, a label that the driver himself would have avoided using. Indeed, Scott instructed his children not to engage in protest activity, fearing that a perceived connection with such activism would hurt his chances in NASCAR. At a time when the civil rights movement was identified with bus boycotts and freedom rides, however, it is important to remember that someone such as Scott used transportation and mobility in a different way politically, as he sought to compete as an equal against white drivers and racing teams. Radical political action is about African Americans engaging in daily spatial struggles, sometimes overt but often nuanced, for the “right to survive” and the “right to move.”

By (re)reading the history of the Wendell Scotts of the world, we are able to understand how the freedom of movement and hence livelihood have been racially controlled, as well as the capacity of people of color to rework their geographic mobility to subvert and counter oppression. Importantly, Scott opens up space for us to think about how the politics of black mobility plays itself out in particular geographic and social contexts and its relationship to the politics of survivability, material reproduction, and oppositional accommodation. Scott’s countermobility depended on an array of bodily, social, and technological work practices. These practices resonate beyond the race track and apply to the mobility strategies employed by many everyday African Americans on the move. We hope that the idea of mobility as antiracism work opens up broader terrains for analyzing the black experience, not only in the past but also in terms of continuing injustices and struggles. Whether on a race track, sidewalk, or a hyperpolicied road, spatial mobility serves as a contested terrain in which different social actors engage in complex political struggles fraught with the potential to reinscribe historic patterns of discrimination or, on a more hopeful note, free people from oppressive conditions.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments, which resulted in an improved article. Appreciation is also extended to Suzanne Wise, Curator of the Stock Car Racing Collection at Appalachian State University, for her archival assistance. Previous versions of this article were presented at the 2014 Race, Ethnicity, and Place Conference, the 2013 meeting of the Southeastern Division of the Association of American Geographers, and at Middle Tennessee State University.

Notes

1. This phrase comes from Wendell Scott’s biographer (Donovan 2008, 93).

2. In the wake of Charleston’s Emanuel AME Church massacre in June 2015 and amid growing negative reaction to the public display of the Confederate battle flag, NASCAR has called on fans not to wave the flag at races. Yet, Confederate flags continue to be visibly flown at race tracks by spectators, who claim that the flag is simply a symbol of southern heritage (not hate) and that NASCAR has simply joined the “political correctness” bandwagon (Bever and Moyer 2015).

References


empathetic pedagogy of the civil rights movement. The


DEREK H. ALDERMAN is a Professor and Head of the Department of Geography at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996. E-mail: dalderma@utk.edu. His research interests include cultural and historical geographies of race and civil rights in the U.S. South, the racialized politics of mobility and travel, and geographies of popular culture.

JOSHUA INWOOD is an Associate Professor and holds a joint appointment in the Department of Geography and the Africana Studies Program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996. E-mail: jinwood@utk.edu. His research engages with questions of race, identity, and white supremacy and peace studies.