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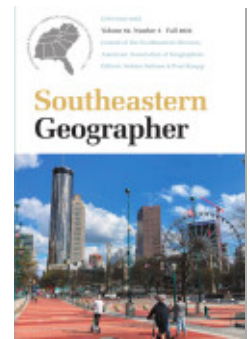
Forum in Honor of Dr. Bobby M. Wilson, a Geographer of the
American South: Introduction

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Forum

Forum in Honor of Dr. Bobby M. Wilson, a Geographer of the American South



Dr. Bobby Wilson, 1947–2021. Photo credit: Department of Geography, University of Alabama.

Forum in Honor of Dr. Bobby M. Wilson, a Geographer of the American South: Introduction

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This forum curates comments and reflections originally developed for a panel convened to remember and honor the life and work of Dr. Bobby Wilson (Figure 1), who passed away in August of 2021. The panel took place on Monday, November 22 in Florence, AL at the 2021 annual meeting of the Southeastern Division of the American Association of Geographers (SEDAAG). It is customary in our discipline to create these moments at conferences and in publications to mark the passing of important and admired colleagues. Indeed, while our discipline is an intellectual exercise — it is also a set of social, emotional, and memorial practices. Graduating with a Ph.D. in geography from Clark University, Bobby Wilson served on the faculty at the University of Alabama-Birmingham from 1974 to 2002. He later joined the faculty at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where he also served as Head of the Department of Geography and retired. Dr. Wilson's work has shaped the field of geography in indelible and lasting ways.

Of particular note are Dr. Wilson's contributions to Black Geographies scholarship, research on the political economy of development in the US South as it intersected with the Black civil rights movement. He was at the forefront of advancing a Marxist analysis and arguing passionately for incorporating a critical understanding of socially constructed racial divisions and what he termed "race-connected practices" into a historical materialist approach. In particular, Dr. Wilson argued for examining how the South's racialized path to industrialization diverged from classical models of American capital accumulation that tended to ignore subnational regional analysis.

It was through Dr. Wilson's many publications and presentations on the social and economic geography of Birmingham, Alabama in which he demonstrated this pioneering theorizing of the intersection of industrialization, racism, and civil rights in the Southeast. Birmingham — although highly consequential to the struggle for racial equality as well as a key node in the southern economy — had not received the attention it should have until Dr. Wilson's work. Moreover, Dr. Wilson's articles on Birmingham represent some of the first critical treatments of race in *Southeastern Geographer*, now a journal known widely for publishing Black Geographies scholarship. Dr. Wilson's research on Birmingham would lead to two landmark books published in 2000 by Rowman & Littlefield: *Race and Place in Birmingham: The Civil Rights and Neighborhood Movements* and

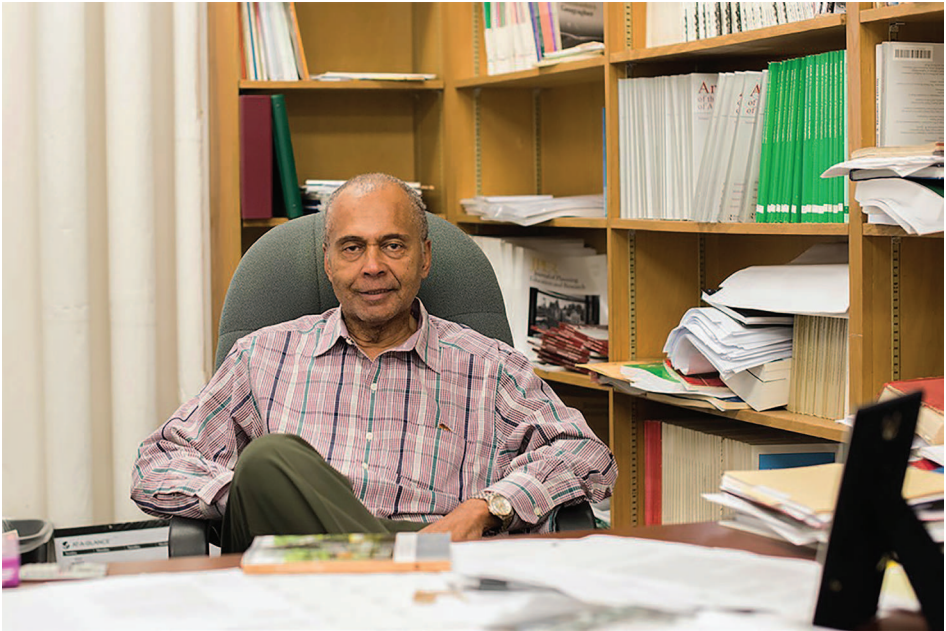


Figure 1. Dr. Wilson at the University of Alabama. Photo credit: Department of Geography, University of Alabama.

America's Johannesburg: Industrialization and Racial Transformation in Birmingham. The highly acclaimed *America's Johannesburg* would later be republished by the University of Georgia Press in 2019 as part of its Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation Series. When authoring the foreword for this new edition of *America's Johannesburg*, renowned scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore noted in particular the deliberate thoroughness and meticulous development of ideas and evidence with which Dr. Wilson worked.

Dr. Wilson made sizable contributions to geographic thought and practice and in advancing anti-racist work. In recognition of this fact, the American Association of Geographers (AAG) recognized Bobby for advancing anti-racist work in geography, awarding him a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015 and the Presidential Achievement Award in 2012. Both awards are the highest and most prestigious honors that a colleague can receive, reserved only for the discipline's giants. At the 2019 AAG Annual Meeting, Dr. Wilson's work was also the subject of two panels titled "Reframing Marxism and Race: The Scholarship of Bobby Wilson." The panels not only celebrated Dr. Wilson's scholarly contributions to the discipline and Black Geographies, but his mentorship of junior scholars and anti-racist activism. The panelists were Adam Bledsoe, Joe Darden, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Perla Guerrero, Wendy Cheng, Benjamin Rubin, and Willie Wright. Yet, his scholarly work and professional contributions were not always appreciated as much

as they should have been. Not until 2021 and posthumously did SEDAAG bestow its own Lifetime Achievement Award on Dr. Wilson, making him the first (and to date, only) Black geographer to receive the Regional Division's highest honor.

Celebrating Dr. Wilson's legacy in Florence was especially appropriate given that he was a frequent attendee and contributor to SEDAAG meetings, and that Alabama was a state in which he lived and labored for many decades. In organizing the memorial panel, we invited scholars from a range of backgrounds, from early career to retired colleagues. Some panelists were close former colleagues of Dr. Wilson, while others knew him more through his publications and presentations. Uniting all panelists, however, were their somber reflections on the insightfulness and originality of Dr. Wilson's scholarship and the expressions of admiration and appreciation for his kindness as a mentor, friend, and ambassador for geography.

Invited panelists spoke about the impact of Bobby's work on them personally and the impact on the field of geography and the critical study of racism and social justice. Their comments, which are presented in the following pages, shed light on the scope of Bobby's legacy as an industrious scholar and generous member of his scholarly community.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ESSAYS

The forum is composed of nine essays from the panelists involved in the Florence SEDAAG panel honoring Dr. Wilson. The first two essays focus on the influence of his family's involvement in the civil rights movement and shed light on the trajectory of his scholarly development. In their essay, LaToya Eaves and Danielle Purifoy call our attention to the role of Bobby Wilson's time at North Carolina College (now, North Carolina Central University [NCCU]), a historically Black college. As they remind us, it was here that Bobby Wilson met Dr. Theodore Speigner, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. in Conservation in the US, who then went on to found and chair the geography department. Speigner encouraged his students to pursue graduate studies and among those that did was Bobby Wilson. Not to be lost in the story of Dr. Wilson's life though, as Eaves and Purifoy show, is the influence of Ora Virginia Wilson, Bobby's mother — whose education and life experience raising a family in Warren County, NC parallels the Black experiences that Dr. Wilson describes in *America's Johannesburg*. Alex Moulton's essay reflects on Dr. Wilson's time at Clark University in the Graduate School of Geography. Moulton shows how as one of the few and first Black geography graduate students, Wilson challenged the terms on which Black geographers were being incorporated into the discipline. Moulton encourages reflection on a question Dr. Wilson posed in his first publication (with Herman Jenkins), an essay in *Antipode* discussing a 1972 symposium titled "*The present and future state of geography: Some black perspectives*" that was held at Clark. Wilson helped organize the symposium, and in the essay asked: "Can Geography, as a set of concepts and tools, be of relevance in solving the problems of the Black American community?"

The next four essays reflect on the defining features of Dr. Wilson's published scholarship following his graduation from Clark. The essays show how Wilson's body of work, through its accessible and deft clarification of how race-connected practices structure

regional political economy, became crucial for geographical scholarship of the US South. Brian Williams centers Wilson's six articles in *Southeastern Geographer* to highlight a commitment to SEDAAG. More than this, Williams shows how Wilson challenged geographers of the US southeast to provincialize white imaginaries of the South and notice how Black geographical experiences and knowledge of segregation, uneven urban development, and anti-racist struggle shows how racism takes place and shapes space. Joshua Inwood reminds us that Wilson went home to the South following graduate school, working in an Alabama that a decade before was dominated by Eugene "Bull" Connor who had presided over the violent attacks on civil rights marchers. For Inwood, the work that Wilson did from this center of southern industrial development, racial violence, and civil rights organizing provide crucial insights on the role of anti-labor politics and racial capitalism in southeastern regional development. Carrie Freshour's essay is a reminder that beginning our analyses of southern industrial development through Wilson's notion of race-connected practices fundamentally changes how and what we can know about the South. Freshour observes that *America's Johannesburg* and *Race and Place in Birmingham* provide not only deeply historical geographical analyses of racial capitalism, but critical reminders of how race-connected practices are contested. Freshour's observations call our attention to the methodologies for regional (Black) geographies that Wilson's work provides. Priscilla McCutcheon's essay reflects on the breadth of Dr. Wilson's scholarship. For her, that scholarship demands that we think critically about how we teach the geographies of labor, racial capitalism, and urbanism. McCutcheon reminds us of one of Dr. Wilson's lesser-known articles, one about Black migrants in Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York. Wilson's work, McCutcheon shows us, was always about creating and maintaining the kind of supportive and nourishing spaces that those Black migrants created in Bed-Stuy.

Charles Connerly and Gerald Webster each offer reflections that center Dr. Wilson's humanity and values as a colleague. Connerly's essay remembers Wilson as his friend and "Birmingham guide," a nod to Wilson's extensive knowledge of Birmingham's citizens' groups and historical landscape. While they both approached the study of race and space in Birmingham differently, Connerly recalls Wilson as a supportive friend, co-author, and collaborator who was generous with his time and knowledge. Gerald Webster reflects on his recruitment of Wilson from the University of Alabama-Birmingham to the University of Alabama Tuscaloosa because of Wilson's scholarly expertise. But as Webster recalls, it was Wilson's commitment to care, thoughtfulness, and everyday support of students and faculty that made him an indispensable member of the Department of Geography at Tuscaloosa.

While the final essay by Nik Heynen reflects on Dr. Wilson's humility and graciousness, echoing the other participants in the forum, it also introduces *Consumer Political Economy and African-America: Slavery to Postmodernity*, the manuscript Wilson was working on prior to his passing. Heynen reminds us of Wilson's friend and fellow Black geographer, Clyde Woods who also died before completing what would become *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New*

Orleans. Heynen reflects on the process of working with Wilson's children and a cadre of Black geographers working as an editorial collective to ensure that *Consumer Political Economy and African-America* gets published.

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