

Study: Wendell Scott's NASCAR driving microcosm of antiracism work today

April 4 2016

Professional stock car driver Wendell Scott competed throughout the segregated Jim Crow South during the tense days of the civil rights movement. His fight to move about the racetrack on his own terms is a microcosm of today's continued struggle for equal rights, according to a new study from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Scott's actions also show how ordinary working-class people defy racial discrimination through their daily actions and that resistance can be found in some of the most unexpected places, said UT geographers Derek Alderman and Joshua Inwood.

"Mobility and transportation remain some of the central social justice issues we face today," said Alderman, head of the Department of Geography. "Transportation and being able to move and having the right to move is core to us making a living. Resistance is not just about formal protest or a boycott or putting pressure on the establishment for rights. Resistance is sometimes just about survival."

Alderman and Inwood's study, "Mobility as Antiracism Work: The 'Hard Driving' of NASCAR's Wendell Scott," was published recently in the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*.

Inwood is a UT associate professor of geography and Africana studies.

Wendell Scott was the first and only African-American driver to win a race in the Grand National Series, NASCAR's highest level.. Alderman

and Inwood use his racing career as a historical case study not typically associated with the civil rights movement. Scott faced considerable discrimination in what was otherwise an all-white sport—including his biggest win being credited to the second-place driver. But through his skills as a self-taught mechanic, he improvised with equipment—using baby scales to measure parts instead of highly calibrated luxury equipment and performing his own repairs at pit stops—to ensure he would be able to continue moving on the track and on the streets.

The UT researchers argue that although Scott did not represent his efforts in terms of civil rights activism, the very work of driving was part of his political practice to move about the racetrack—and life in the United States—with unfettered freedom.

Today, they say, people of color, particularly those who are poor, continue to struggle to get proper access to transportation. Many communities are fighting to keep public transportation in their cities even as those dollars are being shifted to be used for highway construction to fuel automobile transportation.

"The assumption many Americans make is that everyone has access to an automobile and that's not true at all," Alderman said. "There are great racial differences in automobile ownership."

He questioned to what extent people of color have unrestricted freedom to move about American cities as they wish.

"We still hear a lot of cases about the hyper-policing of African-Americans driving cars, being stopped more than white folks, and even the hyper-policing of people walking around cities," Alderman said.

In light of this, the Wendell Scott story teaches the contemporary [civil rights](#) movement that the struggle for survival, and to live, is political, he

said.

"Protest is not just a formal political act," Alderman said. "Activism can be embedded in the very way we live and move about our lives. Even something as seemingly everyday and simple as driving your car could be seen as a political practice. It doesn't mean everyone sees it that way. But it forces us to think about people's motivations in a deeper way."

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

Citation: Study: Wendell Scott's NASCAR driving microcosm of antiracism work today (2016, April 4) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-04-wendell-scott-nascar-microcosm-antiracism.html>

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