Staging the Greensboro Sit-Ins

Rebekah J. Kowal

Setting the Stage for the Sit-Ins

The story of the 1960 sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, has become synonymous with the acceleration of the civil rights movement in the United States. In fact, many attribute the Greensboro sit-ins with the transformation of the movement from a local (or more Southern-based) to a national campaign for the equal rights of Americans of color. I concur, in line with accepted accounts, such as those by William H. Chafe (1981) and Miles Wolff ([1970] 1990), that the initial sit-in was a planned, even “staged” event, not a spontaneous eruption of black enmity as some incorrectly assume. My research, however, departs from these studies where I tease out the ways in which a particular staging represented the protesters’ position within the city’s existing spatial relations, the material and geographic result of racial segregation.

When analyzed in performance terms, aspects of the Greensboro sit-in take on new meanings. Location, demonstrators, attire, speech, action, and bystanders become analogous to theatrical conventions like venue and mise-en-scène, actors, costumes, script, choreography, and audience. This approach also makes it possible to consider issues of acting and reception. In this light it becomes clear that protest organizers situated and designed their demonstrations to maximize their social and political effects. In other words, protesters used theatrical conventions to make an analogy between their inability to get service at the Woolworth’s lunch counter and segregation’s scenographic presence in the built environment of the store.

Before proceeding, let me outline the events of Monday 1 February 1960, and the subsequent days. Ezell Blair, David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil, freshmen at the all-black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College (A&T), bought sundries at the F.W. Woolworth’s five-and-dime store in downtown Greensboro. They then sat at the lunch counter and asked to be served. Denied service by the waitress and then by the store’s manager, the students remained at the counter until day’s end, refusing to relent.

Within a day, the sit-in led to more protests at Woolworth’s and at other department stores along Elm Street, Greensboro’s main shopping street. On 2 February, “twenty-five men and four women students arrived at Wool-
Dressed in ROTC uniforms or their Sunday best, the students apparently passed the time they spent at the counter reading schoolbooks and completing missed homework assignments. Throughout the day Wednesday, students, coming in waves, filled most of the 65 lunch-counter seats. From Thursday to Saturday masses of students showed up to demonstrate against the segregated counters at Woolworth’s and the nearby S.H. Kress store. On Thursday, for example, according to Chafe, black and white students from surrounding schools participated, including three white women from Greensboro’s Women’s College. “By Friday more than 300 students were taking part in the protest.” And on Saturday, “hundreds of students, including the A&T football team, descended on the downtown area” (Chafe 1981:85). Tension mounted as black demonstrators and their white supporters converged upon the city’s business district met by angry white crowds who called the protesters names, waved Confederate flags, and threatened violence. Saturday night both Woolworth’s and the Kress store were forced to close due to bomb scares. Finally, after nearly two weeks, city officials agreed to negotiate, and the protesters suspended their demonstrations.

Temper flared again in April, when it became apparent to Greensboro’s blacks that the department store managers would not budge. Sit-ins began again, this time prompting city officials to arrest 45 protesters. Incensed by the arrests, the black community organized a boycott of the variety stores. Finally, facing a more than 30 percent drop in their profits (the result of the boycott as well as the absence of other customers who took their business elsewhere to avoid putting themselves in harm’s way), some of the managers gave in, opening the lunch counters at Woolworth’s, S.H. Kress, and Meyer’s department stores.

The sit-ins in Greensboro invigorated the U.S. civil rights movement by reinforcing the success of actions like the Montgomery bus boycott, which had proved how effective masses of people could be in swaying public opinion and changing governmental policy. An example of “nonviolent direct action,” the sit-in, like the work-stoppage and the boycott, employed Mohandas Gandhi’s techniques of “passive resistance” to expose and oppose existing social conditions, acting as an alternative to legal or legislative avenues of political intervention (King 1958; Gregg 1959; Waskow 1966; Mayer [1962] 1990). However, the sit-in differed from comparable forms of protest in one crucial respect. While boycotters or strikers made their point through concerted absences, sit-inners exerted pressure by insistent presence, occupying spaces from which they were usually prohibited. Sit-inners put themselves center stage instead of removing themselves from the scene.

Recognizing the success of direct-action in Greensboro, other protesters around the state and the region during the next few months and continuing into the next year adopted similar tactics, staging read-ins at public libraries, kneel-ins at segregated churches, walk-ins at theatres and amusement parks, and wade-ins at segregated pools and beaches.

The images and interviews seen and heard nationally provided a model for many others looking for a compelling way to take a stand. For example, in a commemorative article published by the Greensboro Daily News in 1980 entitled “Greensboro Blacks Supported Sit-Ins,” John Lewis, later a U.S. congressman but at that time a field organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), recalled “seeing people sitting in the Carolinas on television every night. It gave us a sense of kinship, a bond. We said, ‘If they can do it in Montgomery and Greensboro, we can do it in some of these smaller cities’” (in Greensboro Daily News 1980:A–6). And Julian Bond, a founder of SNCC and later also a congressman similarly recollected:
Some of these people were active in their high school NAACP, and when they got to college, they were almost in place holding, and they probably didn’t know they were waiting, but they were poised and ready to jump in. When the Greensboro sit-ins happened in early 1960, that was it. It wasn’t that much of a conscious decision of what to do. Greensboro became the model, almost a blueprint. (in Hall and Thrasher 1976:7)

**Playing the Part**

Given their very front-and-center tactics, sit-ins required staging. Thus, sit-inners faced the kinds of decisions directors or choreographers confront concerning venue, mise-en-scène, casting, script, costumes, choreography, and audience.

Richard Schechner’s “From Ritual to Theatre and Back,” originally published in 1971, enriches this discussion by elaborating the ways that protests are performances. Schechner argues that the theatricality of sit-ins and similar demonstrations ensures that “powerless groups get a hearing” (1977:70). Schechner’s model, built on a metaphor of an exchange, stresses the communicative aspects of these kinds of events. For example, while the sit-ins in Greensboro got the attention of local and national authorities, they also caught the notice of onlookers who watched the events unfold not only from adjoining seats at the Woolworth’s lunch counter but also in living rooms all across the country as the events were broadcast on television. As Schechner points out, “an apparent two-person exchange between activist and authority is actually a three-person arrangement with the spectator supplying the vital link” (70). How did the protesters, mindful of their need to communicate a message to onlookers, go about crafting their protests?

A photograph Jack Moebes took for the Greensboro Record on 1 February 1960 illustrates how the protesters took control of their presentation, cast-

1. The Greensboro Four. Left to right: David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., Joseph McNeil. The protesters took control of their presentation, dressing for the occasion. (Photo by Jack Moebes; courtesy of the Greensboro News and Record/Jack Moebes)
ing themselves as respectable and economically viable members of the bourgeosie (plate 1). Taken on the evening of 1 February, it shows the four freshmen as they strode down Elm Street following the sit-in. What is most striking is that for someone who didn’t know otherwise, the students appeared to be headed to the office or church. Although their outfits are partly covered by stylish overcoats, it is clear that they dressed up for this occasion. McCain, the tallest among them, is attired in an Army ROTC uniform, complete with a hat, tie, and black leather shoes. Blair walks next to him, sporting a suit, tie, and black fedora. Flanking them are Richmond and McNeil, each smartly dressed in a sweater, slacks, and polished shoes. The men’s facial expressions and postures amplify the message of their clothing. They all look at the camera or straight ahead, their faces set with determination; their bodies upright and attentive. These are persons performing “focused purpose.”

Maintaining this level of scenographic oversight, the Greensboro Four hastily formed the Student Executive Committee for Justice, a group that included them “and several other students who are quite reliable in conducting adequate guidance.” The group drafted at least two letters that they distributed to others in the days following the initial sit-in. On the one hand, they used the letters as a way of anointing themselves leaders of the protests, giving reasons such as that they were the “original formulators,” that “this committee has already drafted ‘plans-of-action,’” and that they “possessed a more detailed knowledge of what is taking place.” In other words, they aimed to dissuade other students from “go[ing] over the heads of the committee and start[ing] another such movement.” On the other hand, they wanted to orchestrate the demonstrations to minimize chaos and thus ensure maximum effect. The letters, therefore, served as instruction sheets for those not in the core group. Speaking to this purpose, the organizers wrote:

We must remember that we are now well known in the eyes of the world and we must do nothing to hurt the chances of the minority races nor rob the people who sympathize with us of the loyal support they are giving us. Again may we strongly advocate, NO VIOLENCE NOR DRINKING WHILE WE ARE DOWN TOWN OR IN THE EYES OF THE PUBLIC. We know that we will receive your loyal support in our drive for justice and we hope that you will weigh this letter carefully and cooperate fully. (Student Executive Committee for Justice 1960a)

The letters also demonstrate the organizers’ efforts to manage the demonstrations. For example, they stated guidelines for protesters’ dress: “students will wear dress attire or other pertinent clothing. (Young ladies are urged to look their best and gentlemen wear ties.)” They sought to choreograph the entrances and exits of the waves of demonstrators asking that “all students going down[town] will report to the Library dispatcher so as to make certain that we do not become so crowded until we hinder the stores businesses,” and that “persons […] arriv[ing] later or after the first shift has come, […] seek[ing] to relieve those who desire to be [relieved, should…] quietly check with the spokesmen and then leave quietly.” And they counseled others not to get violent:

The agitators who are heckling our group now are organized primarily for the purpose of “picking a fight.” But if this happens, all of our previous work and desires are lost. Therefore, we beg that you shall completely ignore these persons and neglect the freak accidents. Keep a
“cool” head and we’re always sure of being in the right. (Student Executive Committee for Justice 1960a)

Anticipating the situations in which protesters might find themselves, these rules were actually a scenario for an improvisational performance—not for the theatre stage but for both the on-the-spot and the media audience. Leaving as little as possible to chance, the authors of the scenario advocated self-restraint, self-discipline, and moderation. It was important to project a specific kind of “responsible” image. In another letter the Greensboro Four gave to their comrades in the days following the sit-ins, the same principles were operative. An excerpt of the letter follows:

By now you are fully aware of the passive resistance movement taking place at the downtown Woolworth’s store. As it now stands, there have been appointed official “spokesmen” for the groups participating in this movement. The spokesmen are well informed as to the things which are to be given out to the press and others seeking answers as to our actions. Being as it is that we do not desire to say anything which might be misinterpreted, we are asking that you refer these reporters to the spokesmen for any comments coming from the group. Printed below are some of the possible questions which may be asked and the answers you should give if you deem it necessary to do so. However, we are asking again that you limit your conversation with the reporters, and as we have said, refer them to the spokesmen of the group.

Typical Dialogue

WAITRESS: What do you want?
ANSWER: I would like to be served please.
WAITRESS: I am sorry but we do not serve Colored here.
ANSWER: I beg to disagree with you. You served me at one counter a few feet away and yet you can’t serve me a cup of coffee here?
QUESTION: Who sent you?
ANSWER: God sent us. This is strictly a Christian movement and we feel that this is what God would have us do.
QUESTION: Is there any outside help, such as the NAACP?
ANSWER: No! This is strictly a student movement.
QUESTION: Is the College or its officials involved?
ANSWER: No! As I have said, this strictly a student movement. (Student Executive Committee for Justice 1960b)

Organizers’ appointment of “spokesmen” and scripting of protesters’ answers to bystanders’ questions reveals a desire to present a united front, thereby reducing the chances that audiences would misunderstand their actions. In other words, seeking to define themselves in their own terms, organizers took great pains to portray themselves as independent and devout students carrying out a divinely ordained assignment.

Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah’s outline of the performative aspects of ritual helps in interpreting the significance of the protesters’ representational discipline
Tambiah makes a distinction between ordinary and ritual behavior, holding that ritual, unlike ordinary behavior, is “not designed or meant to express the intentions, emotions, and states of mind of individuals in a direct, spontaneous, and ‘natural’ way.” Whereas spontaneity and intentionality are considered markers of authenticity in the sphere of ordinary social relations, when applied to ritual they are or can be considered “contingent, labile, circumstantial, even incoherent or disordered” (1985:132). To the contrary, ritual action, a form of what he calls “conventionalized” behavior, is formalized and disciplined precisely so that it is impersonal. In Tambiah’s words, “ritualized, conventionalized, stereotyped behavior is constructed in order to express and communicate, and is publicly construed as expressing and communicating certain attitudes congenial to an ongoing institutionalized intercourse” (132). In the cases of both the rules and the letter, protest organizers conventionalized/ritualized their behavior to enhance the communicative aspects of the performance as well as to limit the ambiguity of their message. We can also understand these tactics in terms of redundancy, which, according to Tambiah, is a feature of ritual meant to ensure the efficacy of communication through the repetition of patterns of speech and action.

Paradoxically, redundancy plays comparable roles in the realms of theatre and everyday life. In the theatre, it makes an imagined world seem more real. As Fernando de Toro writes:

> In all forms of theatre there is redundancy in the discourse, characters, set, costumes, etc. [...] The material nature of the visual signifiers (room, clothing, work) is duplicated in the discourse. In this way, any possible ambiguity about the message is completely avoided, and this redundancy sets the meaning right from the beginning of the performance. (1995:72)

In ordinary life, redundancy makes the real seem more consistent (more like the theatre), smoothing out the wrinkles and filling in the gaps created as individuals respond to the exigencies of the moment. In Erving Goffman’s words:

> In response to [...] communication contingencies, performers commonly attempt to exert a kind of synecdochic responsibility, making sure that as many as possible of the minor events in the performance, however instrumentally inconsequential these events may be, will occur in such a way as to convey either no impression or an impression that is comparable and consistent with the over-all definition of the situation that is being fostered. (1959:51)

Capitalizing on redundancy’s multivalent efficacy, the sit-in organizers employed what I call “semiotic excess” to reinforce the multiple meanings of a given discursive exchange. Take for example this conversation between Blair and the counter waitress, included by Albert L. Rozier Jr. in his article “Students Hit Woolworth’s for Lunch Service,” published in the *A&T Record* on 5 February:

> Blair: I’d like a cup of coffee, please.
> Waitress: I’m sorry. We don’t serve colored here.
> Blair: I beg to disagree with you. You just finished serving me at a counter only two feet from here.
> Waitress: Negroes eat on the other end.
Blair: What do you mean? This is a public place, isn’t it? If it isn’t, then why don’t you sell membership cards? If you do that, then I’ll understand that this is a private concern.

Waitress: Well you won’t get any service here. (1960:3)

Throughout this conversation, Blair is notably courteous. His initial request for coffee is direct and polite; he maintains his composure even when the waitress refuses to serve him, “begging” first to disagree and then reasoning with her that the store policy makes no economic sense. When these tactics fail to “convince” the waitress, Blair offers her rational arguments (“What do you mean? This is a public place, isn’t it?”), defending his position by pointing out the distinction between public and private space. Given that there was practically no chance that he would change the waitress’s mind or store policy, why did he continue this dialogue?

Blair “plays” the scene as though he believes he can convince the waitress to serve him (and, in doing so, that he deserves to be served). Nevertheless, the redundancy of his dialog with the waitress (his repeated and deferential requests for service and his argument justifying them met by her repeated refusals) suggests that his speech is meant to exceed the potential of this immediate context. It is a ritual performance designed for the consumption of a wider group of onlookers. Blair’s through line of action is communicating his desire for coffee and showing how commonsense makes it plain that he ought to be served. At the same time, clearly he is not speaking to change the waitress’s mind but to sway the minds of potentially sympathetic viewers.

To accomplish his goal, Blair relied upon theatrical conventions and social clichés to reduce the chances for misinterpretation, in effect trading on the stereotype of the pliant black man. Marking his deference with a redundancy of politeness and supplication he played up his ability to conform to white-identified conventions of speech and behavior, in this way demonstrating his readiness to enter the white world—literally to be served as an equal at the white man’s table. Another character trait Blair enacted was emotional discipline: he remained temperate when the waitress refused to serve him and kept his calm even in front of an unruly crowd.

In Tambiah’s terms, Blair’s stance can be understood as enacting “distancing.” Tambiah: “distancing is the other side of the coin of conventionality; distancing separates the private emotions of the actors from their commitment to a public morality” (1985:133). Furthermore, Blair’s courteousness neutralized the insistence of his repeated requests. But this repetition was a ritual redundancy transforming a simple request for a cup of coffee into a demand for adherence to logic and a moral response that, if granted, would constitute a radical change in society. Indeed, this is how the sit-in played: as the performance of a social revolution. Both blacks and whites knew this. At the same time, even though the stakes were actually very high, Blair engaged in the kind of discursive play associated with theatre. Assuming that Blair knew what the waitress would say even before he engaged her in dialogue, he acted not to try to change her mind about serving him but to bait her to represent the store policy so he could then show that it was based on flawed logic and morality. And, as in theatre, the waitress “had” to reply the way she did. The exchange communicated to audiences near and far exactly what its sit-in authors intended.

Unlike the much more violent scenes to follow in the 1960s, as the civil rights and then the anti-war movements heated up, Blair’s approach to his conversation with the waitress, like the directions given to protesters, ultimately reflected the moderate politics of the sit-in organizers. Their decision
to fashion themselves as proper, polite, patient, and paying customers indicated their participation in what John Hope Franklin calls the “quiet” or “non-violent” strain of the African American protest tradition. As he describes it:

Nonviolent protest is clear, straightforward, unequivocal, and without threats or even guile. Quite often it appeals to the humanity of the perpetrators, and it relies on the paradox, the inner contradiction of the position against which it speaks. (1990:97)

In this light, it appears that the demonstrators performed their “worthiness” regarding equal treatment by adopting “white-identified” modes of dress, speech, and behavior, paying for the purchases at one store counter, and then asking to be served at another. Having been served at one counter, the protesters staged a situation in which being denied service at another would appear wholly unjustified on any basis other than that of arbitrary prejudice.

Editors at the Greensboro Daily News read the protesters’ intentions this way. An editorial published on 10 February asserted:

The sad truth about all this turmoil is apparent: It could have been avoided. If the management had welcomed the handful (only three or four) on the first day and given them double portions of everything, they would havedeparted happy. Their friends might have come, but not en masse. And how can anybody make a cause célèbre when nobody pays attention including the newspapers, TV and radio? (Greensboro Daily News 1960b:A-8)

Apparently, the editors assumed that the demonstrators’ requests for service added up to a kind of test that the management at Woolworth’s could have passed if it had authorized the waitress to serve the protesters double portions. Did the editors really believe that segregation and the protests against segregation would simply go away, as if protesters’ desires could be sated with extra food? According to Chafe, the attitude of incrementalism expressed in this editorial is what fueled the sit-ins, which were, in effect, the black community’s response to “the fraudulent communication and self-deception through which whites had historically denied black self-assertion” (139). On the other hand, the sit-ins embodied a redirection of energy writ large away from dependence on surrogates like lawyers, judges, and scholars who pursued equal rights through legislative and judicial means and toward self-reliance—blacks took matters into their own hands. As Terry Anderson puts it:

[T]he lunch counter sit-ins [...] were a decisive break with earlier civil rights demonstrations and with cold war culture. The sit-ins ignited a young generation of blacks to become activists, and more important, they stimulated some southern and many northern whites to participate in something they began calling “the movement.” (1995:45)

Thus the protests were more than a performance of blacks showing they were worthy of being treated like whites. I contend that in their selection and occupation of forbidden spaces, protesters adopted a radical stance, challenging the legitimacy of segregation as the shaper of urban space.

The City As Stage: Greensboro in 1960

What made the Elm Street department stores, particularly Woolworth’s, symbolically important sites for a series of civil rights protests? Answers to this
question depend on an understanding of Greensboro’s spatial and economic conditions in 1960. Like most American factory towns after World War II, Greensboro faced a host of challenges posed by suburbanization, deindustrialization, and the civil rights movement. Closely affiliated with Highpoint, its neighbor to the south known for its furniture industry, Greensboro was largely a textile center, home to Cone Mills, Starmont Mills, and Burlington Industries (Fripp 1982:135–36). In 1942, its economy received a boost from the wartime build-up, when the U.S. Army opened a Basic Training Center in northeastern Greensboro. The military constructed 954 buildings on 652 acres it had leased from Cone Mills (Stoesen 1993:51). By 1944, the Army designated the training center as the principle Army Air Forces Overseas Replacement Depot (ORD) for the eastern United States, a transit point for over 300,000 military personnel before they departed for combat (52). In 1946, when the Army decamped, these buildings were reassigned for civilian use for emergency housing, light industry, and even dormitories for A&T College (53). Greensboro-Highpoint also inherited a state-of-the-art airport, which the Army had expanded threefold, and which now had a lighted runway for nighttime use (53). The airport continued to grow in the 1950s, with a new terminal built in 1958 with the help of federal funds (Fripp 1983:136). Greensboro was also the beneficiary of the Department of Transportation’s initiative to modernize the nation’s highway system, having been selected as the point at which proposed Interstates 85 and 40 would intersect, just south of the city (Stoesen 1993:56). By the mid-1950s, the city was a regional nexus of air, ground, and rail transportation.

A segregated city in 1960, Greensboro’s geography made manifest a social practice of racial (and class) apartheid (plates 2 and 3). The downtown area, the hub of travel and commerce not only within the city limits but also in the re-
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gion, was divided into four parts by two streets, Market (running east/west) and Elm (running north/south), which crossed each other near the Woolworth’s store. Tracks for the Southern Railway, called “the great divide” by citizens, more or less outlined the division set by Market and Elm, defining large zones of the environs surrounding downtown. Viaducts for the railway’s elevated track interrupted the sightlines from one vantage point to another and inhibited pedestrians’ movement across neighborhood lines. Affluent whites settled in suburbs in the northwest quadrant; working-class whites lived in tract housing or mill villages in the northeast and southwest quadrants; and African Americans made their homes on the southeast side. While there were settlement pockets that diverged from this general picture, they tended to be cases of historic precedent, such as an African American mill village or enclave in the midst of a white community (Scott 2001).

The segregation of Greensboro’s residential neighborhoods allowed for a de facto segregation of students in its schools, a practice that disregarded the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision (Chafe 1981). Jim Crow laws, meanwhile, directed the flow of commerce within the city. According to Alexander Stoesen, “By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Greensboro had enacted a full complement of segregation ordinances, including one that prohibited black- and white-owned businesses from occupying the same city block.” White-owned businesses tended to cluster on and around Elm Street, the main shopping street in the downtown area, while black-owned establishments lined East Market Street, the heart of the black neighborhood. In fact, segregation “ordinances helped to intensify development of the emerging black business district on East Market Street” (Stoesen 1993:57).

Nevertheless, people traveled outside their neighborhoods to take advantage of what each setting could offer. For example, whites occasionally frequented the nightclubs on East Market Street where famous jazz musicians came to play, even though as Stoesen points out, “blacks and whites were physically separated by ropes put up by the police.” And blacks traveled to Elm Street to shop at the city’s major department stores, Woolworth’s, Kress’s, Belk’s, Thalhimer’s, and Meyer’s, in spite of laws forbidding them from patronizing certain in-store amenities like the dining rooms and lunch counters (Stoesen 1993:57–58).

In 1957, for the first time since 1923, planners reannexed the city, expanding its boundaries by more than 30 square miles and extending city limits for the most part to the north and west (Fripp 1982:131). Enlarging the city was one way to accommodate a growing population that, in the decade of 1950 to 1960, swelled from 74,389 to almost 120,000, a 60 percent explosion (City of Greensboro 1993a:4). Although land east of the city, just beyond the African American neighborhood, was included in the reannexation, this expansion was minimal in comparison to those on other sides of the city. For the most part, it was the white citizens of Greensboro who benefited from the surge of residential development in the 1950s and ’60s. For example, in 1960 whites outnumbered blacks nearly three to one, 88,444 to 30,817 (City of Greensboro 1993b:13), but the number of homes owned by whites far exceeded those owned by blacks by almost seven to one, 17,035 to 2,561 (City of Greensboro 1993c:29). According to Stoesen:

Urban sprawl began to consume open land and forests as residential developments and shopping centers went up, shifting shopping patterns
away from the traditional downtown. Strip development blurred city boundaries, and the old sensation of going from one distinct place to another began to diminish. (1993:54)

Modern shopping centers, due north of downtown and accessible only by car, complemented the affluent white enclaves and drew business away from downtown merchants.9

Although the area on the southeast side of town gained least in the reannexation, Greensboro’s blacks were not forgotten altogether in the city’s redevelopment plans. In 1959, city planners proposed four main projects that had an impact on its black residents:

1. A “renewal” of the historically African American Warnersville neighborhood;
2. A reconstruction of East Market Street, transforming it from a two-lane shopping street to a six-lane thoroughfare;
3. The renovation or demolition of existing buildings along East Market Street and its environs called the “Cumberland” area;
4. The construction of a new “Cumberland” shopping center, a strip mall, meant to house the businesses displaced by the Market Street enlargement just north of East Market Street.

Initially, African Americans strongly supported these “revitalization” efforts. Many living and working in the area pinned their hopes on the promises that the projects would ameliorate the “deplorable” conditions of the black neighborhood. For example, in a public hearing on the “Cumberland Redevelopment Plan,” Dr. W.T. Gibbs, president of A&T College, “stated that he was personally interested in the improvement of the area,” citing experiences of shuttling college visitors to and from campus “through this blighted area of the city.” Further, the college’s board of trustees hoped to “purchase some of the land which [would become] available after clearance.” Siding with Gibbs, several residents present at the hearing called the plan a “godsend” and many inquired about allowances given to renters and property owners to cover their relocation costs. Perhaps of all of the projects, the redevelopment of Warnersville held the most promise for the most people. It called for the “demolition of about 1,100 dwelling units out of a total of 1,179 dwelling units presently in the area.” Of the 353 acres to be redeveloped, 720 lots were designated for single-family and duplex housing and 250 lots for apartments (City of Greensboro 1960).

But the plan to widen East Market Street and raise the homes and businesses in its surrounding area proved disastrous. A study of the “Impact of Urban Renewal on the African-American Owned Businesses,” completed in 1999, illuminates the paradox black business-owners faced when presented with the redevelopment plans. Many gave way to the plans given the physical deterioration of their establishments and knowing that their “landlords, most of whom were white, saw no value in reinvesting in the facilities.” The white landlords, on the other hand, had no incentive to upgrade their properties: “With the prospect of redevelopment being imminent, they would not have been able to recoup investments. Also, the higher rents that often follow such investments would have negatively impacted their tenants.” In sum, the researchers state baldly: “The impact of urban renewal was devastating on black-owned businesses. Most black businesses that were on Market Street went out of business” (City of Greensboro 1999).10
The study attributes this failure to several trends:

1. White-owned banks fixed a cap of $13,500 as the most money they would lend to a black person; relocation costs and higher rents in the developed properties far surpassed this amount.

2. Many of the business owners “had poor credit ratings and low net worth”; their businesses ran on a month-by-month basis, “which made borrowing of working capital impracticable.”

3. Independent grocery stores were becoming “economically obsolete,” “being replaced by large chain groceries.”

4. Some of the businesses suited to what the study called a “slum location,” like pool halls, bars, and boardinghouses, could not survive in a more upscale location.

5. It was impractical to think that it was possible to transform a shopping street into a shopping center. Whereas there is room on a shopping street for duplicate stores, such as newsstands, drug stores, beauty parlors, bars, and groceries, zoning in a strip mall requires that there be more variety and less repetition. Hence, there was “not enough room” at the new Cumberland Center for all of the merchants on East Market Street.

6. With the dispersal of Greensboro’s black population and gradual desegregation of its institutions, blacks had more freedom of choice where to shop. They did not feel the need to patronize exclusively black-owned establishments. (City of Greensboro 1999)

Study findings reveal the social impact of the city’s redevelopment plans for its African American residents—especially the proposal to widen East Market Street and relocate its businesses in a strip mall. It is no wonder that the department stores along Elm Street took on greater significance for African Americans, given the imminent demise of their neighborhood shopping street and the anticipation of drastically limited shopping options.

**The Scene at F.W. Woolworth’s**

Despite competition from the new shopping centers near residential developments, the downtown Woolworth’s was holding its own (plate 4). Its location on South Elm Street, “in the heart of the city, one block from the intersection of Elm and Market Streets, the intersection the Chamber of Commerce proudly calls the ‘Crossroads of the Carolinas’” (Wolff 1990:13), made the store a vital player in the downtown area’s bid to remain relevant to its residents. According to Miles Wolff, the store’s L-shaped lunch counter, which seated 65 patrons, was perhaps its main attraction. “Deterioration” of the downtown area left “few places to eat, and Woolworth’s [was]... convenient and fairly inexpensive. [...] The food [was] adequate, and the store’s bakery, which [made] its own cakes and pastries, [was] one of the better bakeries in the city” (13).

Woolworth’s was an important center of local and regional commercial and social interaction and one of the few places downtown where black and white residents came into social contact, since the white-owned shops in suburban shopping centers were mostly inaccessible to black people. In other words, routinely separated in their neighborhoods, schools, churches, and businesses by prohibitions and habit, the city’s inhabitants mingled as they shopped in department stores like Woolworth’s.

But even as cash registers equalized shoppers, regardless of race, store lunch counters separated them solely on that basis. Woolworth’s lunch counter, then, epitomized the illogic of segregation and symbolized the hypocrisy of...
white store owners who would take money from blacks when they shopped but not when they dined. The sit-inner definitely acted on this situation, as was revealed by an unnamed student quoted in the A&T college newspaper:

They don’t separate our money from that of white patrons. It all goes into the same cash register. We feel that when we are shopping in the store and feel the need for refreshment at the lunch counter we should not be denied service. (*A&T Register* 1960a:3)

There is further evidence that the Greensboro Four considered the significance of the Woolworth’s lunch counter when they decided where they would stage their sit-in. As Wolff points out, “They had not come to Woolworth’s on the spur of the moment; they were fully aware of what they were doing and fully expecting to be arrested. In fact, bond was waiting for them” (1990:15–16). To Blair and Richmond, Greensboro natives, the counter stood for an unjust system under which their families had lived for generations. According to the writer of an article published 5 February 1960 in the *A&T Register*:

They stated that they are “tired” of the complacency and fearfulness of the older members of the Negro race, and that they no longer want to be subjected to this sort of “humiliation” and definitely do not want their children to be victims of it. (*A&T Register* 1960b:3)

The lunch counter was a symbolic stage serving a dramatic purpose for demonstrators: On a daily basis it was the scene of the enactment of the city’s double-dealing social practices; it stood for other places or services to which
the protesters lacked access, such as first-rate schools, most suburban neighborhoods, rental properties for businesses on white-dominated shopping streets, bank loans to buy homes or build a business, theatres, libraries, and parks. Not a neutral space, it embodied the legacy of the city’s spatially segregated social relations that had restricted black access not only to public space but also to spaces that were the prerogative of the middle class. In occupying the counter and demanding service, the protesters dramatized both the exclusion and the possibility of inclusion that was at the core of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Furthermore, they kept in motion—through the success of their direct action—the idea that doing something (enactment) could make a difference, thus nurturing the seed planted by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Montgomery bus boycott, which proved that the organization of masses of bodies performing a massive theatricalized action could intervene in political processes with a power equal to or even exceeding that of mobilized voting blocs or legislative and judicial processes.

Goffman, whose *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was published in 1959, just months before the sit-ins, seemed to anticipate the effectiveness of such theatrical actions:

> When an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right
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He also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be and hence forgoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals. The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they ought to see as the “is.” (13)

Indeed, the presentation of themselves at Woolworth’s lunch counter enabled the sit-inners to “make a moral demand” upon all who were there or who would witness their action at a distance. The impact of this moral demand depended on the effectiveness of its enactment, which involved staging, costuming, casting, text, and audience.

By dressing, speaking, and acting as they did, the protesters performed their right to be served “as if” they were white, thereby “integrating” their black bodies into formerly white public space. By adopting characteristics of costume, speech, and manner that, in their particular social context, were marked as “white”—read “civility”—they performed the similarity of their bodies to the (symbolic and to a large degree fictional) white body. Read in this way, the protests seem to have accommodated the racist assumption that black people had to prove that they could be “as if white” before being granted equal rights.

In the Greensboro case, the sit-inners’ challenge was to naturalize their presence at the Woolworth’s lunch counter so that what had appeared to local whites as “unnatural” would be revealed as wholly consistent. Accordingly, the more the four young black men seemed to belong at the lunch counter the more likely it was that they would convince witnesses in Greensboro and beyond of their entitlement to be there. In other words, by behaving as if they were (white) others who would ordinarily be served at Woolworth’s lunch counter, they strengthened their position that access to public space should be determined on the basis of demeanor not on the basis of race. The irony is, of course, that “acceptable demeanor” in 1960 Greensboro meant “acting white middle class.” This “acting white” became especially true once national television news began to feature the protests. Images of these “sensible,” “courageous,” yet “ordinary” college students helped galvanize public opinion that segregation was an outdated if not a wholly unjust practice. As Fred Friendly, president of CBS News at the time of the sit-ins, said in a statement published in the Greensboro Daily News on 27 January 1960: “Suddenly, for the first time, segregation came out of the closet. The conscience of the whole nation was touched” (A–6).

But were these students “really white”? In spite of the way they appeared on the evening news, as I have already suggested, the Greensboro sit-ins also signaled an emerging radicalism among younger African Americans who had grown tired of legalistic and incrementalist approaches to civil rights. The turn from the courts to the streets had begun. However polite, the sit-ins were more confrontational and obstructionist than integrationist. To accomplish this, the sit-inners performed Bertolt Brecht’s “defamiliarization.” In Brecht’s words:

When something seems “the most obvious thing in the world” it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up. What is “natural” must have the force of what is startling. This is the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. People’s activity must simultaneously be so and capable of being different. (in Willet 1964:71)

Seen this way, the protesters achieved their objective by means of civil unruliness. In playing the part of respectable patrons, they challenged white stereo-
types of African Americans as coarse, uneducated, or uncivilized. In occupying Woolworth’s lunch counter, they installed the black body where it was not allowed. Finally, in politely demanding service and not leaving when rebuffed they highlighted both the absurdity of the denial and the bravery of their refusal to adopt a deferential stance in the face of white attempts to exert power.

Conclusion and Epilogue

There is no doubt that Greensboro paved the way to a more performance- and less electoral-driven political process. For evidence we must only look ahead several years to when anti-war demonstrators adapted similar tactics against the Vietnam War. Throughout 1967, for example, mostly white students on college campuses picketed, destroyed draft cards, boycotted classes, made demands of administration officials, and obstructed recruitment interviews by the Dow Chemical Company, a Napalm manufacturer. That October, during what demonstrators called “Stop the Draft Week,” a diverse crowd of nearly 50,000 people assembled in Washington, DC, before the Lincoln Memorial preparing to march to the Pentagon and “sit-down” in the parking lot. Before the march, organizer David Dellinger acknowledged the radical nature of what everyone planned to do declaring that “this is the beginning of a new stage in the American peace movement in which the cutting edge becomes active resistance” (in Anderson 1995:178). Once in the lot, the protesters were brutalized by state troopers and federal marshals. Nevertheless, in spite of their cuts and bruises, many in the anti-war movement regarded the sit-down as a success (179). I would argue that in adopting direct action as a mode of protest, anti-war protesters acknowledged the efficacy of performance as a political tool as well as the significance of a particular mise-en-scène—in this case, the Pentagon parking lot—for maximum visibility and amplification of a message. Similarly theatrical tactics have become no less effective over time, as both David Román and Susan Foster have shown with respect to AIDS activism and, more recently, protests against global capitalism (Román 1998; Foster 2003). For both these causes demonstrators staged variations of direct-action—albeit more aggressively confrontational than the sit-ins in Greensboro—in socially, politically, and economically charged environments to achieve maximum effect.

If the legacy of the sit-ins can be measured in part in terms of their influence on subsequent modes of protest, what was their impact on the physical city itself, and on the ways in which citizens inhabited the built environment? Protesters’ acts of defiance were tantamount to the enactment of an alternative reality in which black and white patrons were entitled to the same services and free to commingle in all public spaces. Furthermore, once this reality was enacted as a scripted if improvised performance that soon had a clear dramatic development in the minds of both local and national viewers, it was impossible to turn back the clock. Once performed, the sit-ins changed the way Greensboro residents (and many far from Greensboro)—black and white—thought about urban spaces. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the potential for civil unrest and economic disruption in Greensboro and beyond impacted urban and suburban development. There was white flight to the suburbs; the growth of mall culture; and the transplanting of housing segregation to zones far from the “inner city” (read, “black city”). The architecture of difference was perpetuated in spite of laws prohibiting segregation. Such practices reigned not only in other Southern cities but also in those in the North and West, making
social planning on the eve of post-industrialization, particularly with respect to the economic integration of the urban poor, an unsettling prospect for the nation.

Nevertheless, today the U.S. is in many ways less racially segregated, especially for members of the middle class. In the past five years, in New York City alone, communities like Harlem, in Manhattan, and Fort Greene and Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, have become hubs of urban renewal, fashionable places for races to commingle, and lucrative for real estate developers. Since 2000, when I began research on this article, Greensboro too has changed. Although I have not been back to visit, I have learned that the city, with help from private investors and backed by the administration at North Carolina A&T, has purchased the old Woolworth’s building. In 2005 it will open as the International Civil Rights Center and Museum, featuring a reconstructed lunch counter on the original site. Reported in the Greensboro News and Record, “Drivers behind the museum envision it as a place where college professors teach African American history courses, international peace activists visit with community leaders, and rotating holograms allow local people to tell their civil right’s stories” (2004).

Besides its institutional function, the museum will be an interactive memorial. The “mirror” behind the counter, for example, will be a movie screen featuring images of sit-ins from February through July 1960. Escalator riders will be bombarded with “Colored Only” and “White Only” signs projected on the walls of the chamber and simulated conversations the Greensboro Four had in their dorm room the night before the sit-in as they planned their occupation of Woolworth’s will be piped in (Greensboro News and Record 2004).

No doubt, the museum will become one of the city’s prime tourist destinations, a jewel around which new coffee shops, theatres, and retail stores will radiate (Briggs 2004). Given the slant of this essay, it seems fair to acknowledge that the museum’s planners and boosters are now capitalizing on what the protest organizers knew all along—that staging the sit-ins at Woolworth’s would make great theatre and would attract audiences. That said, I think it is important to wonder whether the nation’s efforts to ensure racial equality for all of its citizens have come so far in 45 years that the nostalgia expressed in such simulations, in spite of its triumphant tone, is not also unintentionally ironic and troubling.

Notes

1. This research was supported by Haverford College, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the University of Iowa.
2. I have composed this narrative of the sit-ins based on both primary and secondary sources. Therefore, mine is not meant to be a definitive account, but rather a means of establishing a sequence of events.
3. In the postwar period, the most notable instance of the use of nonviolent direct action prior to the sit-ins in Greensboro was the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, organized by Martin Luther King Jr., in December 1955. In Montgomery, protesters staged a boycott of public transportation in their challenge of Jim Crow laws that forced them to sit at the back of city buses.
4. In Civilities and Civil Rights, William H. Chafe asserts that:

   In the long view of history, the Greensboro sit-ins will justifiably be seen as the catalyst that triggered a decade of revolt—one of the greatest movements in history toward self-determination and human dignity. America would never be the same again once students discovered the power of direct-action protest and others followed their example. (1980:137)
According to Jack Bloom:

By the end of February, thirty-two cities in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Florida, Maryland, Kentucky, and Alabama had experienced sit-ins and other demonstrations protesting racial restrictions. By the end of March another forty-one cities had been subject to these demonstrations, and Georgia, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas were added to the list of states struck.

In April even Mississippi joined. (1987:157)

5. Jack Moebe's photograph appears as the frontispiece of Miles Wolff's 1970 book (reprinted in 1990), Lunch at the 5 & 10. I have not yet located the original article published in the Greensboro Record. However, based on conversations with J. Stephen Catlett, Archivist, Greensboro Historical Museum, I know that the photograph was taken in the evening of 1 February 1960 after Woolworth's had closed for the night. I assume, therefore, that the photo was published in the Record on 2 February.

6. Andrew Scott, Director, Department of Housing and Community Development in Greensboro provided this overview of residential settlement patterns (Scott 2001).

7. I make this claim based on my survey of a “City of Greensboro Annexation Map” showing annexations from 1868 to the present. In annexations post-1957, especially those in the early 1960s, the city did claim some areas east of the city. But even with this enlargement, the areas annexed to the east were much smaller in size than those on the other sides of the city.

8. Andrew Scott emphasized to me the significance of the lopsidedness of this annexation that expanded the area where affluent whites had historically settled (Scott 2001).

9. Fripp points out:

The final blow for downtown as a retail center was the creation of multilevel enclosed malls surrounded by thousands of parking spaces. Four Seasons opened in 1974, and 18 months later Carolina Circle was completed. [...] The impact of the shopping centers was swift and obvious. In 1972 there were 215 retail establishments downtown, employing 2,802 people, with total sales of $93 million. In 1977 there were 139 establishments employing 926 people, and sales had dropped to $41 million, while sales at Friendly totaled $72.5 million and those at Four Seasons totaled $55.4 million. (1982:137)

10. For the full report and analysis of this study see: North Carolina Institute of Minority Economic Development, Inc., “Impact of Urban Renewal on the African-American Owned Businesses,” City of Greensboro, October 1999. All of the quotations in this paragraph are taken from this study.

11. Here I am taking the lead of Chafe, who aligns “civility” with the progressivism of Greensboro’s white liberals. As he puts it: “Civility was what white progressivism was all about—a way of dealing with people and problems that made good manners more important than substantial action” (1981:8).

12. The original section of the F.W. Woolworth’s lunch counter is exhibited at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institute.

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Rebekah J. Kowal teaches dance history and theory in the Department of Dance at the University of Iowa. Prior to moving to Iowa, she held a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in Performance Studies at Haverford College, and a Regional Fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania’s Humanities Forum. She has a PhD in American Studies from New York University and danced professionally in New York City before attending graduate school.