Dr. Dorothy Jenkins Fields:
Nurturing the Landscape of Black Miami Studies

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A generational battle over Black epistemology rages in Florida. State Governor Ron DeSantis has positioned himself as a key figure aiming to reshape the state's intellectual, cultural, and speculative landscape. In 2020, he targeted South Florida schools that opted to remain virtual amid Florida's failure to contain the COVID-19 virus. Under the threat of budget cuts, teachers were forced to return to classrooms without adequate state support for sanitation and social distancing measures.[1] Two years later, DeSantis signed the Parental Rights in Education bill, known to its detractors as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, which restricts discussions about sexuality and gender in the classroom.[2] In 2022, DeSantis enacted The Stop W.O.K.E. Act, legislation that criminalizes teaching about systems of oppression in classrooms and workplaces.[3] This act laid the groundwork for banning books, denouncing the Advanced Placement course in African American Studies, executing a "hostile takeover" of the progressive public liberal arts college New College of Florida, and defunding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives in higher education.[4] Even in the bill's name, the specter of anti-Blackness is held at the forefront of its legal grounds. To be "woke" was a colloquial term in Black communities and communities of color, co-opted by the far right as a mocking dagger inflicted at the level of language. The systemic erasure and suppression of intersectional Black histories is a recurring struggle, and for nearly half a century, Dr. Dorothy Fields has been a pivotal voice in charting new pathways for Black place-making.

Dr. Fields worked on a committee that prepared schools for integration in her first appointment in the Miami-Dade Public School District. She said, "People were very resentful."[5] Following this assignment, she was appointed as the head librarian at the Myrtle Grove K-8 Center in Opa Locka, Florida. Contemporarily, Opa Locka is part of the Black Miami area, but at the time, Fields said, "Opa Locka was all-white."[6] As a new Black faculty member in 1964, she clearly recalls the drama of her first day: She walks up to Myrtle Grove

[1] Lori Rozsa, Moriah Balingit, and Valerie Strauss, "A Florida School District Wanted to Wait to Reopen School Buildings. Gov. Ron Desantis Threatened to Cut its Funding," *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/florida-coronavirus-schools/2020/08/14/a37b39a8-dd99-11ea-b205-ff838e15a9a6_story.html.

[2] Jaclyn Diaz, "Florida's Governor Signs Controversial Law Opponents Dubbed 'Don't Say Gay'" *NPR*, March 28, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis.

[3] Katie Reilly, "Florida's Governor Just Signed the 'Stop Woke Act.' Here's What It Means for Schools and Businesses," *TIME*, April 22, 2022, https://time.com/6168753/florida-stop-woke-law.

[4] Fabiola Cineas, "Ron Desantis's War on 'Woke' in Florida Schools, Explained," *Vox*, April 20, 2023, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23593369/ron-desantis-florida-schools-higher-education-woke.

[5] Dorothy Jenkins Fields, interview by Mysia Anderson, January 28, 2022.

[6] Fields, interview.

with her designer Louis Vuitton purse in tow. A white woman enters the building with her also carrying a Louis purse. As Dr. Fields heads for the door, she and a white woman mistakenly bump purses and exchange looks. As they go inside, the white woman turns to her and says, "You haven't cleaned my room yet."[7] Shortly after, all the educators met in one room for an introductory meeting. The principal neglects to introduce Fields. She raises her hand—partly because she hopes an introduction from the principal will clean up the misunderstanding about her position. The principal says, "Oh, yes. We also have Miss Jenkins,[8] our new librarian."[9] The white woman melts and performs embarrassment at having mistaken Fields for a janitor. Fields politely responds, "Not a problem. Not a problem."

Over the next several interactions with her white colleagues, Fields expressed compassion as they adjusted to the new social environment, one that had fashionable Black women with Louis Vuitton purses in charge of the library. She even extended this compassion to her appointed clerk, an older white woman who "had never worked with a Black person, let alone under a Black woman, let alone had been in the same room as a Black woman."[10] The clerk's table was positioned a few paces in front of Fields' desk. There was a white man who would come into the library to deliver books and mail, and the possibility of this fine white man finding out that she, a white woman, worked under a Black woman greatly pained the clerk. In other words, she did not want him to know that she sat at the table and not the desk. So Fields said, "Okay, when he comes in, move to the desk"[11] (Fields didn't want her to have a heart attack). A couple of months later, this woman would retire early.

It was during her time in this position that Fields had that fateful exchange with the county library clerk who informed her that of the "10,000 books on the shelves, not a single one was written by a Black person about Miami's Black history."[12] As the school's first Black librarian, Fields wanted to diversify its book collection in preparation for the 1976 American Bicentennial, which was a series of events to celebrate America's 200th anniversary. She began calling the county to ask for books on the history of Black people in Miami. During an oral history interview, she recalled a white lady on the phone who said that there were none on the subject. When Fields asked her why, the woman said, "I guess these people haven't thought enough of themselves to write their own history."[13] Fields remembers this response as a pivotal moment that changed her trajectory by instantaneously shifting her purpose. As a Black Miami native and historical preservationist, Dr. Fields' oral history is interconnected with her tremendous labor to reimagine a rebirth of a twentieth-century playhouse into the landscape of the contemporary neighborhood. Fields' legacy has been

[7] Fields, interview.

[8] Jenkins is Dr. Fields' maiden name.

[9] Dorothy Jenkins Fields, interview by Mysia Anderson, January 28, 2022.

[10] Fields, interview.

[11] Fields, interview.

[12] Carlos Frías, Leslie O. Atkinson, and Elisa Baena, "From Marching with Martin Luther King Jr. to Preserving Miami's Black History," *Sundial*, January 16, 2023, https://www.wlrn.org/podcast/sundial/2023-01-16/sundial-from-marching-with-martin-luther-king-jr-to-preserving-miamis-black-history.

[13] Fields, interview.

solidified by her determination to answer a call to nurture Black Miami futures alongside yesterday. Through the use of oral histories, recorded by myself and others, this artistic profile commemorates her resilience in hearing the Reveille, and the unfolding journey that the song begets. Her leadership and institution-building have bequeathed material and intangible inheritance for those who are rooted in Black Miami.

In 1977, Dr. Fields founded the Black Archives History and Research Foundation, an organization that strives to "collect and preserve the rapidly vanishing material that reflects the African American experience in Miami-Dade County." About a decade later, the Black Archives acquired Overtown's Historic Lyric Theater, relocating its headquarters to a site deeply rooted in Black Miami history. In 1896, Miami's Overtown neighborhood, once called "Colored Town" and "Central Negro District,"[14] was developed for the Black workers who powered Henry Flager's Florida East Coast Railway. Their quick labor was near sorcery, resulting in Miami's speedy development and earning the city its moniker of "The Magic City."[15] Next to Miami's Downtown, Overtown was quarantined from white areas by these same railroad tracks that the magic-makers laid down. At nearly the same mythical speed, this place—on the colorful side of the railroad tracks—became the place to be. Overtown was a neighborhood where African Diasporic performance cultures flourished with the renowned Lyric Theater staging 20th century enchantment. The Lyric Theater was established in 1913 by Geder Walker. A local news article described the theater as "possibly the most beautiful and costly playhouse owned by Colored people in all the Southland."[16] Hosting movies and vaudeville acts, Lyric Theater anchored an area that became known as Miami's "Little Broadway." At the height of its expansion, the theater presented the Lyric Bakery and the Lyric Ice Cream Shop and Café. Overtown's theater, hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, and frequent celebrity sightings attracted talent and tourists from all over the nation. Lyric Theater staged a variety of scenes; "school children and civic groups performed on its stage and special events such as commencement ceremonies were held there. Visiting luminaries Mary McCloud Bethune, Ethel Waters, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and others lectured and sang at the Lyric."[17] However, this vibrant theater, rooted in Black art, performance, and politics, would go through a drastic change emblematic of many Black geographies in the 1960s—the mobilization of state-sponsored urban renewal initiatives through the development of a federal highway.

In 1965, Lyric Theater was forced to close its doors after operating for over fifty years due to the construction of I-95, which cut through the primary thoroughfares of the district. This choreography of state violence revealed a larger landscape of anti-Black hegemony across the nation. In "The Other Side of the 'Free' way: Planning for 'Separate But Equal' in the Wake of Massive Resistance," critical landscapes scholar K. Ian Grandison identifies

[14] *The Black Miami*, directed by Carl Smith and Michael Williams, featuring Dr. Marvin Dunn, Ava Moore Parks, and Dr. Paul George, Syndicado Distribution, https://syndicado.com/product/the-black-miami/.

[15] Connie Ogle, "Why is Miami Called the Magic City? Here's the Real Story," *Miami Herald*, updated December 30, 2021, https://www.miamiherald.com/miami-com/miami-com-news/article225776940.html.

[16] Black Archives History and Research Foundation of South Florida, Inc., Miami, Florida.

[17] Black Archives History.

post-Brown v. Board of Education urban planning initiatives, such as freeway placements, as long-term strategies of massive resistance to changing spatial orders. Although Overtown was positioned right next to Miami's downtown, its value quickly shifted from the purview of tourists and performers when the community was externally destabilized. The construction of I-95 decimated Overtown and displayed Grandison's assertion that highways can "serve even more effectively as a color line barrier and stigma than the railroad tracks."[18] In the wake of this spatial disruption, the neighborhood and theater both went through a series of identity shifts. At one point, the theater was purchased by a church called The General Assembly of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Father; and at another, it was abandoned.[19] The Black Archives obtained the Lyric Theater when it was in a nearly condemned state. The abandonment of the building reflected the environmental neglect experienced by the Overtown community.

How a Theater Becomes a Living Archive

When Fields first took her board of directors to see the Lyric Theater, many of them believed the condemned building was simply a teardown. But one member protested and said he remembered a time when Black men would sit outside the Lyric playing checkers, bragging about how they started Miami. It was this story that propelled Fields to find the incorporation document that featured "182 authorizing votes cast by Black migrants from the Bahamas, North Florida, Georgia and South Carolina."[20] Their decision to restore Lyric Theater amplified a quiet melody that has long existed in this neighborhood. Lyric Theater neighbors the International Longshoremen's Association, a Black Miami collective bargaining brotherhood that formed in 1936.[21] It's around the corner from the preserved home of Black Miami's first millionaire, Dana Dorsey. It's a short walk from the Historic Mount Zion Baptist Church, which now stands as a "cliffhanging African-American sacred structure"[22] next to I-95. Right next door, the area where the Miami Times, Black Miami's oldest newspaper, once stood is both absent and present. Like many other sites in this neighborhood, this location didn't survive the upheaval. These cultural sites indicate that Overtown was a place of Black economic prosperity, which supports a colloquial narrative that the area was targeted because of self-sufficiency and wealth. With Field's leadership, the Black Archives made a spatial intervention.

Soon after the Black Archives acquired Lyric Theater, these community-facing undertakings would have to coincide with ensuring structural sustainability. The foundation

[18] K. Ian Grandison, "The Other Side of the 'Free' way: Planning for 'Separate But Equal' in the Wake of Massive Resistance," in *Race and Real Estate*, eds. Adrienne R. Brown and Valerie Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 208.

[19] Black Archives History.

[20] Donette Francis and Allison Harris, "Introduction: Looking for Black Miami," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 16, no. 1 (2020): 1-17.

[21] "International Longshoreman's Association Local 1416 – Going Overtown," Going Overtown, accessed March 16, 2023, https://goingovertown.org/listing/international-longshoremans-association.

[22] Grandison, "The Other Side of the 'Free' way," 230.

was now tasked with securing millions of dollars in funds to restore the building. Their institutional archive reveals a long and arduous process of researching the site's historical significance; finding a trustworthy architecturally team who will eventually receive the bid once funding is secured; discovering the building codes for architectural compliance that accompanies new ownership; and unearthing the unique needs and history of the surrounding community—all without the presence of a pristine archive and institutional continuity. Funding could come from general obligation bonds, allocated state funding, or donations from the community which is called upon to "remember when" this building mattered to us deeply. On a flyer titled, "Remember the Lyric Theater? We Need YOUR Help!!!!," the community is asked to contribute more than just monetary funds.[23] They are asked to donate their memories, photographs, and programs that place the building as a theater, movie house, church, community center, or concert venue. They are asked to donate programs from baby christenings and funeral proceedings. When official archives fail to hold, the community's embodied orientations, memories, and personal archival practices are crucial artifacts that resist systemic erasure. Over a lengthy restoration process, Lyric Theater would be reborn as the home of the largest collection of Black life in South Florida and a contemporary chitlin' circuit.

Be that as it may, the archive confesses an entangled relationship between the concerted effort to restore the theater and revitalize the entire community in a (re)enactment of urban renewal. Fields and other staff had to write many articles and host numerous fundraising programs to capture the imagination of potential donors who would only see a condemned building in a neglected neighborhood. The foundation relied on branding the theater as "the oldest legitimate theater" in South Florida. This appeal to legitimacy cites a regional argument noted in Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristic of Negro Expression." In 1934, Hurston placed Southern Black theater in jook joints, with full-figured, dark-skinned Black women as central protagonists in these embodied scenes of blues music and social dance. This was in sharp contrast to the "colorstruck", northern aesthetics of blackness in theatre that was characteristic of commercial Broadway theatre. She bluntly states, "To those who want to institute the Negro theatre, let me say it is already established…The real Negro theatre is in the Jooks and the cabarets."

Further, the celebrity connections documented across its history were continually referenced across materials, and the Black Archives referred to the heydays of the Lyric as "The Harlem Renaissance of the South."[24] Given Miami's history of being dubbed "New York City's playground," New York as Miami's authenticating spatial referent—Broadway and Harlem—is indicative of the challenge of proving the merit surrounding claims of historical significance in the city. In "Memories of Africville: Urban Renewal, Reparations, and the Africadian Diaspora," Angel David Nieves argues that "community-based demands place on restorative justice through memory-making and commemoration often fall short and

[23] Black Archives History.
[24] Black Archives History.

fail to respond to the pressures of competing interests."[25] Nieves' sobering revelations on the pitfalls of historical preservation efforts in not only Canada's Africville but across multiple sites within the African Diaspora, illustrate how inequitable value systems, often rooted in histories of white supremacist aesthetics, perpetuate anti-Black systems of oppression even with the best of intentions. Nieves explains:

> It was not until the 1970s and early 1980s that national, provincial, and municipal governments would enact legislation to protect buildings considered worthy of historic designation. By the 1970s preservationists began to use a scoring system, based on an established and legally sanctioned value-based judgment model for determining the fate of buildings nominated as historic structures. If a building scored high during its evaluation, it was saved from the wrecking ball. If it scored low, it was not normally saved.[26]

Thus, it is difficult to measure if Black historical preservation efforts benefit the surrounding community when "total climates" of anti-Blackness is the weather.[27] The Black Archives had to make the Lyric legible to historical preservationist scoring systems that are often culturally insensitive to histories of exclusion or do very little to disrupt the dominant ideologies surrounding the value of historic Black sites.

Before architectural plans were set in stone, the archive was filled with maps on maps of what Lyric Theater and its surroundings around would, could, or should look like during this period of dreaming. Adding to the momentum of transformation, in 1997, Fields and the Black Archives History and Research Foundation led an initiative to have the Overtown Community designated as a National Trust "Main Street" community. Her work ignited a response from the city to rename an area as the Historic Overtown Folklife Village. With this state designation, the area was granted access to certain protections that would ensure through the use of restrictive covenants that the buildings would not change.

Like many Black Miami cultural institutions, the challenges to sustain and grow a Lyric Theater audience are only increasing due to Florida's wider political landscape, rampant displacement of Black residents, and gentrification—a spatial pattern propelled by climate change and the "heritage tourism" that the historic designation attracts. As a result, the restoration of Lyric Theater and its surrounding areas has been a contested Black geography and a temporal conundrum. In a 2005 article on urban renewal, Denise Perry, then co-director of an Overtown grassroots organization called Power U, expressed skepticism about the project's ability to include the community.[28] Perry believes that it might isolate the already struggling Black, low-income community. State-funded historical buildings are

[25] Angel D. Nieves, "Memories of Africville: Urban Renewal, Reparations, and the Africadian Diaspora," in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, eds. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde A. Woods (Toronto: Between the Lines Books), 82.

[26] Nieves, "Memories of Africville," 91.

[27] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.

[28] Black Archives History.

usually tasked with the challenge of remaining relevant in a contemporary social fabric, and the building's revitalized presence could misalign with the intended community-based orientations. In *The Florida Room*, performance theorist Alexandra T. Vazquez states, "I would add that the rhetoric of 'Overtown' as a total loss finds ready accomplices in the new businesses now gentrifying the neighborhood and who have imposed themselves there to celebrate 'what it once was'".[29]

This statement begs the question: do historical preservation efforts that at times rely on heritage tourism undercut the sustainability of contemporary Black communities? Urban scholar Davarian L. Baldwin cautions, "To be fair, within the larger information and service economy, racial heritage tourism is offered as one of the few avenues for economic development in an impoverished Black neighborhood."[30] While there are indeed businesses enacting predatory capitalism in the wake of Black displacement, the critiques of Fields' method of shoring up Black futurity in the face of racial capitalism should also take into account Lyric Theatre's efforts to be a contemporary source of professional Black theater, Mother's Day concerts, film festivals, talent nights, community wellness fairs, etc. The structures that determine methods of sustaining Black life-worlds have created conditions of complicity in racial capitalism that are hard to avoid, yet Lyric Theater maintains a place to enact possibilities as Black real estate interests shrink.

In 2010, the legitimacy of the restoration was questioned when the project's general contractor's questionable past in organized crime and fraud came to light. The over half a million dollars he collected after ten years and an uncompleted building nearly put the entire restoration in jeopardy.[31] This affront to the project's aims would ultimately be overcome; yet, it demonstrates the pressures of realizing a state-funded restoration project while performing Black legitimacy in the public eye. The restoration of Lyric Theater by the Black Archives was ultimately a political act of Black resistance to spatial erasure. A prolific historic preservationist, Fields' has been an active agent in the restoration of six historical buildings across Black Miami, the creation of the Black Heritage Trail, and positioned the Black Archives in Lyric Theatre as the crown of a Black Miami cultural map that structural racism attempted to destroy. Miami historian N.D.B. Connolly argues that the demise of Overtown is emblematic of a more complicated story than white supremacy and Black dispossession. He maps the Overtown loss onto the compounding failures surrounding the promise of Black suburbs in Black Miami, such as poverty-stricken Liberty City and how the war-on-drug ravaged Opa-Locka.[32] The story of Lyric Theater is a story of Black Miami and all the mythologies and stereotypes that come with being from "the city." These

[29] Alexandra T. Vazquez, *The Florida Room* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 129.

[30] Davarian L. Baldwin, "Chess Moves on a Checkerboard: Heritage Tourism, University Life, and the New Faces of Gentrification," in *Race and Real Estate*, eds. Adrienne R. Brown and Valerie Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 246.

[31] Natalie O'Neill, "Overtown's Historic Lyric Theater Hangs in Limbo," *Miami New Times*, April 29, 2010, https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/overtowns-historic-lyric-theater-hangs-in-limbo-6368517.

[32] N.D.B Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 3-4.

overdetermined meanings are animated by global anti-Blackness. The Black Archives and Lyric Theater intervene in this minefield by allowing community members to have a voice and provide their own meaning-making.

Dorothy Shares Her Inheritance

Born and raised in Black Miami, Fields is of Bahamian descent, and she is an inheritor of familial legacy that has informed her path in recognizing Black Miami identity through the collection of everyday artifacts and intimate geographic maps. This orientation toward storytelling and kinship was present at the onset of her efforts to create the Black Archives and revitalize Lyric Theater. One of her first initiatives was to start an oral history project focused on the older Black inhabitants living in Overtown and the Brown Subdivision, another Black Miami neighborhood. When Dr. Fields and I met during our initial Zoom session, she told me that she had just finished an interview with a local news station concerning the restoration of Georgette's Tea Room, "a historic meeting place for Miami's Black Arts Community."[33] Our meeting began with Fields asking me why I liked stories. I confessed that ever since I was a little girl, I enjoyed listening to stories from the Bible and everyday life. It was this love for storytelling that attracted me to oral history and the craft of acting. Considering that she is the leading institutional archivist of Black life in South Florida, I returned the question with a curious confidence rooted in an assumption of kindredness. She bluntly informed me that she didn't like telling stories at all. She had grown up in the shadow of the gigantic stories that her mother and her mother's siblings shared about their exciting career, their memorable times back at school, and the letters they received from their equally exceptional friends building their respective legacies all across the world. Her mother and all six of her maternal aunts and uncles were college graduates with successful careers before World War II. Fields noted, "This was simply unheard of, even for white families."[34]

They were the offspring of a washerwoman and a handyman who sacrificed all they could to educate their children. In an interview with a local radio station, Fields mapped the emergence of her family's investment in education to her grandmother's presence in Harbor Island, Bahamas. Her grandmother worked as a child domestic in the family home of a white medical doctor. When the patriarch was done reading the newspapers from the United States, he would tell the Black girl to throw the newspapers away. Her grandma did not throw away the stories of Black Americans doing well by going to school in Jacksonville and Atlanta. Instead, she read them and fashioned a plan to get married, have children, and move to the States. In 1903, the family moved to Key West before venturing up north to Miami. South Florida Historian Sharony Green notes this path as a repeating pattern among many Bahamian travelers who establish roots in Miami.[35] Like other Bahamians traveling to the

[33] "Georgette's Tea Room: A Historic Meeting Place for Miami's Black Arts Community," *The New Tropic Creative Studio*, accessed July 3, 2024. https://thenewtropic.com/georgettes-tea-room-a-historic-meeting-place-for-miamis-Black-arts-community.

[34] Fields, interview.

[35] Sharony Green, "Tracing Black Racial and Spatial Politics in South Florida via Memory," *Journal of Urban*

new city, they had family in Miami's bayside Coconut Grove Black area, but Fields' grandmother desired a city flare. The family settled in Overtown, a few blocks from Lyric Theater. Her grandmother would cross the railroad tracks to get the laundry of tourists and make a living from her hands.

Her grandparents had to send their children north to receive their high school and college education. There was not a Black high school in Miami until the opening of Booker T. Washington High in 1927.[36] This school gave Miami's Black communities local access to 12th-grade education and opened up possibilities for trajectories outside of service-oriented jobs. In addition to a racially motivated bombing during the school's construction, its opening was delayed by the unexpected devastation of the 1926 hurricane, known as the Big Blow, which occurred before the advent of predictive technologies. A 1960 Booker T. Washington High School graduate, Fields believes that the school was bombed, in part, due to its location on 7th Avenue, a main road where many whites traveled from the suburbs to downtown. These seven siblings attended institutions of higher education beyond state lines because Black people were not allowed to attend Florida high schools at the time. In fact, the State of Florida would pay for students to pursue high school and college opportunities outside the state. "Well," Fields said, "they would pay for their fare from Tallahassee to wherever the hell they were going because they were not allowed to go to Florida's Tallahassee colleges."[37] Remarkably, Fields grew up surrounded by Black doctors, teachers, and lawyers—Thurgood Marshall even came to their home. But she grew tired of hearing their stories because she never thought she could be any of that.

The stature of her family followed her throughout her education, and she became enveloped by educators who compared her to their legacy throughout her schooling. With a loving meanness, her teachers would often say, "You're not as smart as your family. What will you do?"[38] A religious child, Fields began to pray about it. She decided early on that she would be the one to write their stories.

However, it would be Dr. Fields' own life experiences that would make her uniquely prepared for this calling. When it was time for college, Fields says she planned her escape from the pressures of her family's legacy in Miami to attend Spelman College. In this different Southern geography, she witnessed Confederate flags flying on government buildings for the first time and quickly became involved in Atlanta's Civil Rights movement. Fields shared how she marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. To her mother's great disappointment, Fields failed the reading entrance exam given to all freshmen. Yet, as fate would have it, this was exactly where she needed to be to receive a formative experience about the struggle for racial justice. Her remedial reading teacher was Christine King Farris, who told her students that not only would she teach them how to read, but she would also

History 44, no. 6 (2018): 1176.

[36] "Booker T. Washington Senior High School," *Going Overtown*, accessed March 16, 2023, https://goingovertown.org/listing/booker-t-washington-senior-high-school.

[37] Fields, interview.

[38] Fields, interview.

introduce them to her brother who was coming down to desegregate Rich's Department Store in Atlanta.[39] Fields and her classmates were to participate in this act of disobedience through their presence and marching, in addition to helping with press releases and making coffee. She recalls the menacing presence of Ku Klux Klan members who set up a counterprotest across the street in full regalia. Sometimes they would stay on their side of the street. At other times, they would venture to the side of the students. Within close proximity, Fields remembers them carrying bowling balls in shopping bags. They would swing them and attempt to hit the students in the stomach. Their goal was to "stop them from having children."[40] Or, the Klan members would try to push the students into traffic. The protest leaders appointed "catchers" to stop the victims of this kind of assault from falling into oncoming cars. All the while, the students were coached in the art of nonviolent resistance.

Fields tells the interviewer that they were allowed to sit at the department store's restaurant, Magnolia Room, the following year in 1961.[41] In her usual joyous way, she reveals that she and her group of comrades forgot to bring money to pay for their meal—they didn't think they would make it that far. A group of Spelman and Morehouse administrators were called to assist with payment. Unfortunately, when they arrived back on campus, she remembers a burning cross awaiting them after their triumphant meal. Fields remembers others remarking on their act of bravery. With a tongue-and-cheek levity, she says that she simply wanted to use her charge card in the department store.

Fields graduated with a B.F.A. in art from Spelman College. The unassuming, audacious Dr. Fields would go on to receive a certificate from Emory University in archives administration and historic preservation, as well as a Ph.D. in twentieth-century African-American history, historic preservation, and public history from The Union Institute and University in Cincinnati in Ohio. Not only that, but she also raised two daughters—one who is an attorney in New York and the other who is a history professor and opera composer at Carnegie Mellon University. Dr. Fields did this all while holding down a full-time job in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Sadly, Fields believes that the school system couldn't see the value in what she accomplished. They would even take out from her pay when she would go to conferences, and this has impacted her current retirement package. She said, "It's okay because God provides, and I could not have done it without His help…I am a religious woman who knows there is a Creator."[42] Without institutional support, Fields also began to call upon her family, friends, and members of her church. She was advised to create a board because she couldn't quit her job while her husband was in law school. Stopping potential board candidates after service and at grocery stores, Fields got 50 board of directors composed of church members and retirees, many of whom were her mother's friends. She

[39] Matthew Bailey, "Rich's Department Store," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, Nov 17, 2005, last update August 2, 2018, https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/business-economy/richs-department-store.

[40] "Sundial: From Marching with Martin Luther King Jr. to Preserving Miami's Black History." WLRN, January 16, 2023, https://www.wlrn.org/podcast/sundial/2023-01-16/sundial-from-marching-with-martin-luther-king-jr-to-preserving-miamis-black-history.

[41] Frías, Atkinson, and Baena, "From Marching with Martin Luther King Jr."

[42] Fields, interview.

knew she could trust them. Her mother even paid for all the interns when the foundation was starting up out of her own retirement. They all believed in Fields' vision of establishing a "manuscript and photographic repository for the African American community of Miami."[43] Their steadfast support turned her mission into a reality by creating a lasting tribute to Black Miami's cultural heritage.

A Theater Stewards Black Miami Studies

In 2022, I accompanied Fields on a walking tour beginning at Lyric Theater and continuing out into the neighborhood. The historical markers of what once were abandoned or neglected buildings resembled beloved tombstones across the neighborhood. Yet, there was something about Fields' walk—determined, certain, stylish, and unafraid to (re)enact her dreams of what she knew this place is, was, and will become. Everyone seemed to know her, and she seemed to know every building's history and current happenings of folks doing the work in Overtown. We stopped to take a picture of her mural on a storefront wall. Yes, she has most certainly earned this level of public celebration. Fields' visibility is a culmination of decades of service and institution building. I would estimate that the institutionalized archive reveals that Lyric Theater's restoration process amounted to well over 10 million and took nearly 25 years to complete. This spatial project coincided with the epistemological work of the Black Archives in institutionalizing Black Miami Studies. The Black Archives is a key source in the bibliographies and acknowledgments of a growing list of academic books and dissertations—including my own.

Figure 1. Dr. Dorothy Fields in front of a mural by Marvin Weeks that features her image while on a walking tour in Miami, Florida. Photo by Mysia Anderson.

[43] "Meet the Founder Dr. Dorothy Jenkins Fields," *Black Archives History & Research Foundation of South Florida*, accessed July 16, 2024, https://www.bahlt.org/about/meet-the-founder.

Two years later, The Historic Lyric Theater kicked off a year-long celebration of its 110th anniversary as "The Crown of Overtown." A crown symbolizes acknowledged authority, made evident by an array of jewels. It is the highest point of a physical or imagined location.[44] Organized by The Black Archives Foundation, this commemorative event was designed as a 1920s soirée, harkening back to another era. Dr. Fields and the organizers sought to capture the energy of the Lyric Theater's emblematic historical origins, steeped in a period of excellence and elegance in Black Miami. Guests responded in kind, adorning themselves in the drama of vintage Black glamour. At check-in, attendees entered the 'speakeasy' and were greeted with upscale step-and-repeat backdrops for photos and soigné guides. As soon as I got out of the car, I immediately felt underdressed and not in sync with the event's aesthetics. I felt like I was caught out of time. As feminist performance theorist, Rebecca Schneider argues, "To witness a reenactment is to be a bystander, a passer-by, possibly out of step, in the leak of another time, or in a syncopated temporal relationship to the event that (some) participants hope will *touch the actual past*, at least in a partial or incomplete of fragmented manner."[45] The glamor of the crowd was like beholding the creative labors of the present with the appreciation of yesteryear in the same breath. Once the doors of the Lyric were open, the guests were choreographed to become audience members oriented toward the proscenium stage. The evening featured soulful musical acts: the Melton Mustafa Orchestra, Raheen Devaugn, and Keke Wyatt, in addition to speeches and presentations from the Black Archives team and Miami elected officials. The evening was marked with repeated declarations of 110 *more* years of Black art, performance, and political action, which felt like a sharp contradiction to the realities plaguing the Black geography Lyric theater is currently seeped in.

Dr. Fields looked beautiful on the night of the anniversary event. Within this mise-en-scene of sparkles, feathers, music, alcohol, food, and stage lights, the speculative horizon of 110 more years of this community-rooted Black institution possibly reenacted the excess of the "Roaring Twenties" before the dust storms of the Great Depression. Or…perhaps, Lyric Theater was performing another possibility, another speculative geographic future. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick explores the interplay between geographies of domination and Black women's geographies to "think about the place of black subjects in a diasporic context that takes up spatial histories as they constitute our present geographic organization."[46] She argues that examining the philosophical registers of this relationship "allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic."[47] This excessive night of Black enjoyment and glamor realizes this interplay and allows Black Miami audience members an opportunity to relish in the current fact of their existence and continued survival. As Black Miami's communities are structurally positioned as "ungeographic," the Lyric Theater performs

[44] Black Archives History.

[45] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2011).

[46] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 42.

[47] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, x.

glamorous refusal by asserting speculative futurity with the seeds that Dr. Fields planted.

The unfolding of Lyric Theater's building history correlates with practices of divestment and neglect juxtaposed with Black creative labor and architectural ingenuity to still create Black life within the structures that lasted the tests of time. When Lyric Theater publicly commemorates its 110th anniversary amid a disjointed institutional history and environmental threat, it performs a temporal slippage in service of a reclamation of the past and future. The past is made present when the Black Archives serves as a guide within and outside the theater's walls. A collapsing of Diana Taylor's binary of "the archive" and "the repertoire,"[48] the presence of Black Archives inside Lyric Theater performs the dramaturgy of how this Black theater can survive with a legacy that extends into the future. The organization is not only a steward of the Lyric, but also the entire surrounding geography of Black Miami as well. The theater creates a living archive by preserving and inviting performance. This twinning of ideas that tend to be seen as separate thoughts within performance studies is fabulously wedded in this Black geography. McKittrick's study of how space is produced through the material and imagined geographic practices of Black women resonates with the spatial history of Lyric Theater.

As a Black Miami institutional builder, I can also imagine the scope of Dr. Fields' work was influenced by the 1980 McDuffie Riots, a deadly display of Black anger against state violence in Florida. In December 1979, 33-year-old Arthur McDuffie, an African-American insurance agent and former Marine, was beaten to death by police officers. McDuffie ran a red light while riding his motorcycle. The initial one-patrol car police chase concluded with a dozen officers on the scene as participants in a murder and attempted cover-up. The coroner's report revealed that McDuffie's cracked skull and other bodily injuries resulted in his brutal death on a street in Miami's Liberty City. The officers involved unsuccessfully tried to rule the killing as an accident. When charges were eventually brought upon four of the officers for their deeds, the trial was moved to Tampa in an attempt to avoid the communal uproar of the impending verdict. The three-hour distance of the acquittal pronouncement did not stop the ensuing protests and riots that spread across Overtown and Liberty City. For three days, Miami was in a state of emergency. Florida Governor Bob Graham was compelled to deploy 3,500 National Guard troops to the area. Eighteen people were killed, 350 were injured, 600 were arrested, and the property damage resulted in $100 million worth of damages.[49] The riots are regarded as the first race riot after the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s. Taking place two years after the founding of the Black Archives, this public

[48] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[49] Johnny Agudelo and Kamille Bascus, "Decades after Miami riots, many still die at the hands of police," *Chaplin News*, December 20, 2022, https://caplinnews.fiu.edu/more-than-40-years-after-miami-riots-many-still-die-at-the-hands-of-police-includes-multimedia-content; "An In-depth Analysis of Miami's 1980 Race Riots," 2022. WLRN, https://www.wlrn.org/television/2022-01-20/new-documentary-examines-miamis-1980-race-riot.; Michael Sainato, "Remembering Arthur McDuffie," *The Miami Times*, May 20, 2015, updated February 17, 2022, https://www.miamitimesonline.com/kill/remembering-arthur-mcduffie/article_df4dca66-9097-11e6-b48c-10604b9ffe60.html.

violence is coeval with Black Miami's epistemological and structural neglect.

Now more than ever, Lyric Theater, as both a home to the Black Archives and a performance venue, is a critical site in the battle for Black Miami sustainability. At the start of the 2023-2024 school year, Marvin Dunn, a groundbreaking Black Miami scholar, organized a one-mile protest from Booker T. Washington High School to the County School Board. The protesters were largely political leaders, teachers, and students who were opposed to the new state curriculum standards that claimed enslaved Black people benefited from slavery.[50] This fight for truth in the face of the state's attempt to silence Black truths was present during Fields' struggle to steward the Black Archives as a Miami Dade Public Schools employee. The territory of epistemological erasure has proven the continued cultural value of theatre, performances, storytelling, and community programs that are outside the public school system. The battle to protect our current physical and cultural environments from a state of decline or loss requires trailblazers like Dr. Fields. She once told me that the Black Archives was her baby that she watched grow. She shared, "it's my baby... I gave it birth and laid the foundation with the expectation that the proper infrastructure will be utilized to sustain and grow it for future generations."[51]

Angel David Nieves warned how our desire to "own things" could be wrapped up in grammars of conquest. He posits, "Inserting black geographies into our worldview and our understanding of spatial liberation and other emancipatory strategies can perhaps move us away from territoriality, the normative practice of staking a claim to place."[52] Dr. Dorothy Fields' life reflects a generosity that imagines a landscape to be cared for and cherished for generations to come. By creating a communal institution, Dr. Dorothy Fields extends the legacy her family bestowed upon her, making it accessible and beneficial to the broader community. Her work epitomizes the political capacity of Black women institution-builders who nurture counter-epistemologies concerning Black life. Lyric Theatre and the Black Archives is in an increasingly ungeographic place. It is my hope that Lyric Theater and the Overtown community will become a site for the preservation of Black Miami's history and open possibilities for the next generation of place-makers in the 110 years to come.

[50] David Fischer, "Protesters March through Miami to Object to Florida's Black History Teaching Standards," *AP News*, August 16, 2023, http://apnews.com/article/florida-black-history-desantis-race-d2eb034764722a98f371881dd40ca2ce.

[51] Dorothy Fields, email message to Mysia Anderson, July 6, 2024.

[52] Nieves, "Memories of Africville," 91.

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