

THE FREE SOUTHERN THEATER'S STORY CIRCLE PROCESS

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I am a storyteller. I say storyteller instead of liar cuz there's a heap o' difference between a storyteller and a liar. A liar's somebody that covers things over mainly for his own private benefit. A storyteller, now that's somebody that uncovers things so everybody can get some good out of it. A heap o' good meaning can be found in a story . . . if you got the mind to hear it.

—John O'Neal, *Don't Start Me To Talking . . . : Plays of Struggle and Liberation: The Selected Plays of John O'Neal*, 2016

The story circle process is simple. Small groups of people sit in circles and share stories. That's it. There are guidelines for its structure and some key principles of practice—which I will outline later—but, in essence, it is simply about sharing and listening.

This is more radical than it may sound. The core frameworks for the process counter those frequently found in our educational, political, and even artistic spaces. Story circles encourage us to embrace dialogue over debate and to value the nuances of experience over even the best-structured arguments. They ask us to abandon the adversarial stances so often seen as the hallmark of serious engagement and take up postures more conducive to offering and receiving. Ultimately, they teach us that it is through listening to our stories, rather than arguing our points, that we discover who we are.

The story circle process is also about the power of sitting together to listen deeply. I would feel foolish writing about it without echoing the concerns shared by John O'Neal, the process's chief architect and steward, when

For John O'Neal (1940–2019), who uncovered so much for so many of us.

embarking on a similar task. His is the seed story of any discussion of this process—the one to which the rest of us are responding—so I'll quote him at length and point you to his “Story Circles Discussion Paper.” He writes:

I hesitate to present these suggestions for the operation of the Story Circle process in writing because the process, like the stories that people use it to share, is essentially oral in nature. When things are written down we have a tendency to treat them as more final than they need to be. On the other hand, when people sit down to actually talk together we have the chance to look at the body language, listen to the tone of voice, to question if you're not clear about something or to challenge if you think that's in order. We even use different words when we write, maybe even a whole different kind of language. I even think differently when I'm writing than when I'm talking. If you, dear reader, were sitting here I wouldn't be bent into the computer keyboard staring at the screen typing or editing what I've already written. I would be engaged with you, concerned about how you react to what I say, changing my direction or my emphasis according to your responses. . . . On the other hand, when I'm writing I can re-write and edit and you'll never know it . . . well, maybe you'll never know it. If you were really here I wouldn't have to imagine as much about who you are and could pay more attention to what you want or maybe need from me in order to understand what I'm trying to communicate and how I feel about it. So, in this case at least, writing is a poor substitute for being there. (O'Neal, n.d.)

In addition to alerting us to the irony of writing about a process defined by its liveness, O'Neal is also highlighting the extent to which the story circle process pushes us toward the relational.² It is not a way to hear a series of monologues; it is an intentional process for structuring equitable dialogue.

With that said, I will try—while “bent into the computer keyboard staring at the screen”—to tell my story circles story.

“A New Area of Protest”: The Free Southern Theater and Junebug Productions

I learned the story circle process from four remarkable teachers: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founding artistic director of the Brooklyn-based dance

2. For discussions of cultural and psychological barriers to relational behavior, see *Enacting Pleasure* (Davis & Davis, 2001), in which artists and scholars respond to a call “to conquer a culturally embedded fear of love and give play to the pursuit of relational pleasure” (p. 5).

company Urban Bush Women; Stephanie McKee, artistic director of Junebug Productions; Wendi O'Neal, New Orleans-based cultural organizer; and her father and cofounder of the Free Southern Theater (FST), John O'Neal. Each of these artists works deliberately to activate black traditions of culture and protest within their broader efforts toward community wellness, justice, and joy. They also each have deep connections to New Orleans, Louisiana—a city whose unique slave history has fostered practices of black cultural resistance like no other in the country and in which the story circle process developed and thrived.³ My use of story circles and study of their history is indebted to each of these teachers and so my story begins by naming and offering gratitude to them.

Story circles were developed by the FST, which, although not born in New Orleans, had its coming of age there. In 1963 John O'Neal and Doris Derby, two field directors from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), along with Gilbert Moses, a journalist from the *Mississippi Free Press*, decided theater could be a powerful way to engage rural black communities frequently excluded from the planning tables of the civil rights movement. With an initial donation from Langston Hughes and support from other artists and activists, they launched the FST as the theatrical arm of SNCC. Founded in Mississippi but soon relocating to New Orleans, the integrated FST brought free presentations and postshow discussions of works by writers as diverse as Ossie Davis, Samuel Beckett, and Bertolt Brecht to public and community spaces across the U.S. South. Their founding treatise identified the following goals: “to establish a legitimate theatre in the deep South”; “to stimulate creative and reflective thought among Negroes in Mississippi and other Southern states”; and to cultivate a theatrical form “as unique to the Negro people as the origin of blues and jazz” (Derby, Moses, & O'Neal, 1969, p. 4). Summarizing their charge, they wrote, “Through theatre, we think to open a new area of protest” (p. 4).

The story circle process emerged to push past the limits of the traditional postshow discussion and facilitate more inclusive dialogues. Rather than ask audiences to talk back to those on stage, audiences and actors sat together in circles to share personal stories evoked by the show. The FST was, after all, less interested in showcasing the talents of their artists or pushing movement propaganda than in using theater to open community conversations—conversations facilitated by SNCC field secretaries and other

3. For more on the New Orleans history of black cultural resistance see Arend (2009); Flaherty (2010); Johnson, R. (2016); Johnson, W. (1999); Rasmussen (2011); Sublette (2009); and Turner (2009).

movement organizers such as Fannie Lou Hamer (Dent & Schechner, 1969). As FST members Thomas C. Dent, Richard Schechner, John O'Neal, and Gilbert Moses wrote,

It is not simply that the artists and poets and actors and directors who have made the FST wish to say something. More importantly, there is an audience which cries to express itself. In this sense, the FST has always been, and continues to be, a popular theatre. The audience is articulate and active—no one who has seen an FST performance can fail to recognize that the audience is the most important and expressive element in it. (Dent & Schechner, 1969, p. xii)

The FST's goal was not to awe or impress but to engage and activate. The theatrical performance was merely the prompt. The real action was the personal storytelling and subsequent discussion about issues of concern and the growing movement to address them. Story circles helped facilitate this work.

This upending of traditional theatrical structures by centering audiences rather than artists emerged from the movement's commitment to radical democracy and bottom-up leadership as articulated and enacted by SNCC—particularly its matriarch, Ella Jo Baker. Baker was a life-long organizer for racial and economic justice whom Stokely Carmichael described as “the most powerful person in the struggle of the sixties” (quoted in Olson, 2001, p. 150). With a leadership style more facilitative than didactic, Baker called a national meeting of student organizers to support those making headlines at lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina. Her goal was not to dictate what should be done but to create a space where students could strategize for themselves. As SNCC member Clayborne Carson (1995) recalls, “The letter [inviting young leaders to the gathering] assured students that, although ‘Adult Freedom Fighters would be present for counsel and guidance,’ the conference would be ‘youth centered’” (p. 20). This now-historic meeting of April 1960 resulted in the birth of SNCC.

Baker's critique of hierarchical leadership models permeated her work with SNCC. Despite being the elder organizer, for example, she facilitated democratic planning meetings in circles rather than deliver lectures or directives from the front of the room (Michna, 2009, p. 539). She also pushed SNCC's student organizers to embrace the core value that those most affected by a problem should lead the strategizing around its solutions. This was a challenge for many of the largely northern and comparatively privileged students flooding the South to support the movement. As scholar and activist Barbara Ransby (2003) writes of Baker's approach,

Talented and educated young black people were persuaded to forfeit their privileged claim to leadership of the race, a status that would naturally have been afforded them according to pre-World War II uplift ideology, and instead to defer to the collective wisdom of sharecroppers, maids, and manual laborers, many of whom lacked even a high school education. White activists were encouraged to reject existing race and class hierarchies and do the same. This was a fundamental break with black politics as usual. Poor southern black people were not merely SNCC's constituency; they were revered for their knowledge, commitment, and sacrifice. (p. 365)

Summarizing Baker's leadership, SNCC member Joanne Grant (2012) recalls, "She taught SNCC students the importance of nurturing local leaders, the value of organizing local groups who would make their own decisions, and the vital concept of a group-centered leadership as opposed to a leadership-centered group" (p. 309). The FST sought to put these same values into practice, not only by using theatrical tools to engage those most affected but also by refashioning theatrical structures to put new voices at the center. As John O'Neal—himself an English and philosophy major from Southern Illinois University—said to an audience sitting in folding chairs and on the ground behind a house in Ruleville, Mississippi, "You are the actors" (quoted in Sutherland, 1969, p. 24).⁴

As civil rights struggles shifted into the 1960s and 1970s, O'Neal felt the FST's mission and work needed revising. The company's final production was the 1980 tour of his solo show, *Don't Start Me to Talking or I'll Tell Everything I Know* (O'Neal, 2016), which showcased the wit and wisdom of ordinary people through the SNCC-created character Junebug Jabbo Jones. After this production, O'Neal laid the FST to rest and announced the company's rebirth as Junebug Productions—a new theater for a new time. In 1986, he gave the FST a traditional New Orleans funeral—complete with coffin, brass band, second line parade, and eulogy—and hosted a conference on the role of arts in society called "The Funeral for the Free Southern Theater: A Valediction Without Mourning" (Cohen-Cruz, 2006; Considine, 2016; O'Quinn, 1986).

Junebug quickly embarked on a series of collaborations that solidified the story circle process and its centrality to their work at the intersection of community arts, dialogue, and action. Two such projects, both multi-year endeavors, were "Junebug/Jack"—a collaboration with Dudley Cocke of Appalachia's Roadside Theater that brought black and white communities

4. For more on Baker, see Grant (1981, 2012).

together to talk about racism—and “The Color Line Project”—a national tour of what had become the trilogy of Junebug Jabbo Jones plays (O’Neal, 2016) accompanied by community dialogues about local civil rights histories. Carlton Turner, a Mississippi-based artist, organizer, and mentee of O’Neal’s, who describes story circles as his “most important tool,” points to this period in the 1990s and early 2000s as the process’s most formative. According to Turner, it was through these and other cross-cultural partnerships—with Roadside as well as New York’s *Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater*, San Francisco’s *Traveling Jewish Theater*, and others—that O’Neal and his collaborators honed in on the story circle’s power to bridge divides and speak across difference. As he says, “The circle represents our common humanity—that everyone is created equal and everyone has a voice. This tool allows us to live in that practice” (C. Turner, personal communication, August 30, 2018).

Junebug continues to work from its base in New Orleans and remains rooted in FST’s original mission of creating theater with and for communities in the Black Belt South. The company is now helmed by Stephanie McKee as artistic director and the story circle process remains a core practice.

Continued Spread and Contemporary Use

Story circles are used widely by theater artists to support ensemble-building and generate material for playmaking, by organizers to surface core concerns and guide planning and action, by educators to keep student voices at the center of learning, and by those at the intersection of these various roles for myriad purposes. Junebug Productions—particularly O’Neal, McKee, theater artist Kiyoko McCrae, and singer and cultural worker Wendi O’Neal—has been central to this growing use, through not only practice but also deliberate documentation, teaching, and exchange (McCrae, McKee, O’Neal, & O’Neal, 2009–2012).

Many New Orleanian organizers adopted the practice in the wake of the civil rights era, making it a hallmark of the city’s approach to grassroots mobilization. “Color Line Project” partner Curtis Muhammad and another former SNCC member, Kalamu ya Salaam, for example, have both centered story circles in their work—Muhammad in his organizing for racial and economic justice and Salaam through Students at the Center, the high school–based writing program he cofounded with educator Jim Randals to support youth organizing for educational justice (Buras, 2011; Flaherty, 2010; Michna, 2009). The practice has spread

among organizers through a number of means, including the meeting grounds offered by Alternate ROOTS, a Georgia-based organization for southern cultural organizers that Turner led from 2001 to 2017, and the Highlander Research and Education Center, a national organizing hub based in Tennessee. Among community-engaged theater artists, Linda Parris Bailey of Carpetbag Theater in Knoxville, Tennessee, and “Junebug/Jack” collaborator Dudley Cocke of Roadside in Norton, Virginia, are two who have made story circles a core company practice for both art-making and community dialogue. Independent artists who regularly use story circles due to their mentorship from civil rights-era organizers include Eboni Noelle Golden, Shani Jamila (O’Neal’s niece), Paloma McGregor, and Harold Steward.

Although many have long brought story circles to their teaching in university settings, the practice is increasingly finding its place among those interested in humanistic pedagogies and university-community collaborations. This broadened dissemination within higher education has largely been facilitated by Imagining America (IA), a national consortium of scholars, artists, and activists committed to campus-based organizing and community engagement, as well as its offshoot, the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture. Jan Cohen-Cruz, a scholar and practitioner of community-based theater, was IA’s director from 2007 to 2012 and invited Carlton Turner and Dudley Cocke to consortium events and projects along with Carole Bebel, a longtime Junebug partner and cofounder and executive director of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans. Through them and others, story circles became, as current director Erica Kohl-Arenas describes it, “part of IA’s DNA” (E. Kohl-Arenas, personal communication, January 9, 2019). They are used during staff meetings (ross & Peters, 2018) as well as in national convenings and have been adopted by many of its members to foster equitable dialogue in and beyond the classroom. Describing their particular power in higher education, Cohen-Cruz says:

Experiencing story circles has opened many of my students to the varied ways people come to know things worth knowing, much of which has not come from formal educational settings. . . . [It] teaches them in a powerful way that is often missing in “higher education.” Higher than what, I often ask. Indeed, the term higher ed is a dead giveaway of yet another great lesson that story circles impart to university students—the humility of what people know simply from their lives, and not because they “got in” to this

or that school, or that they are part of some elite group; a story circle is a great leveler. (Personal communication, January 7, 2019)

Story Circle Guidelines

The story circle process is not a unique practice. It resonates in important ways, for example, with circle practices of many Indigenous populations and restorative justice work, liberatory pedagogies of educators like bell hooks (1994, 1999) and Paulo Freire (2000), and methods for community dialogue forged by artists like Augusto Boal (1993) and Liz Lerman (2003). It is, however, a *particular* practice. It emerged from black-led organizing of the civil rights era in the United States. When facilitating the process, it is important to honor its history and name your teachers.

The process, as I learned it, uses the following structure. The process begins with the offering of a theme or seed story to which others will respond. A theme could be something as broad as finding lessons in surprising places and a seed story could be a story told by the facilitator, an experience the group has just shared (i.e., a play or current event), or a text the group has read. The process then goes as follows:

1. Sit in groups of no more than about eight people, depending on numbers and your sense of how long the group will be able to sit and listen.
2. Honor the circle. It is a radically democratic arrangement that puts us in equitable relationship to one another. Sitting in that arrangement is an important practice. To test the circle, I often ask that participants make sure no one has to move to see anyone else.
3. Ensure that time is shared equitably. Everyone will have three minutes for their story. Storytellers do not have to use the full time but cannot go over.
4. Ensure the task of timekeeping is shared equitably. Stories are told sequentially around the circle and the person who has just shared serves as timekeeper for their neighbor. Timekeepers should signal when there is about a minute remaining and gently alert storytellers when their time is up.
5. If you do not have a story when it is your turn, you can pass and the circle will return to you at the end.
6. There is no note-taking or recording. Remembering the lessons of oral tradition, the process honors what Wendi O'Neal calls our "original

recording devices”—our ears, hearts, minds, and bodies. If, however, the process is being used explicitly to gather information—for playmaking or assessment, for example—and everyone consents, stories can be recorded. It is important, however, to not underestimate the ways both telling and listening are affected when notes are being taken or audio or video is being captured.

7. There are no interruptions or clarifying questions while stories are being offered. There will be time for conversation later.
8. Be sure what you're telling is a story—not an opinion or argument—and be sure it is yours to tell. A story is a personal experience with a beginning, middle, and end and it must be a story that happened to you.
9. John O'Neal (n.d.) says, and I've heard my teachers repeat it, “You don't have to like the story being told but you have to respect the storyteller's right to tell it.”
10. O'Neal also stresses “the law of listening” (para.10). He writes, “In storytelling, listening is always more important than talking. If you're thinking about your story while someone else is telling theirs, you won't hear what they say. If you trust the circle, when it comes your turn to tell, a story will be there” (para.10).
11. After everyone has told their story, allow time for crosstalk within the circles. I often start this by asking people to first offer images they are left with from the stories. Once this comes to a natural close, open dialogue can begin.
12. When crosstalk is complete, provide some sort of synthesizing or closing activity. This can be as simple as a full group conversation or as complex as asking each group to devise a three-minute performance piece or poem about their group story.

I use story circles in a number of contexts—in processes of community-based conversation and art-making, in classrooms to illustrate and activate student-centered and humanistic teaching and learning, and as “a leveling tool”—as both Carlton Turner (personal communication, August 30, 2018) and Jan Cohen-Cruz describe them—among people with varying degrees of status or privilege.

The story circle process has brought me to some of my dearest teachers, collaborators, and friends and led me to listen to an array of stories about history, pedagogy, and politics. I have been working with Jawole Zollar and Stephanie McKee for over a decade and have been exploring the histories discussed previously for just as long. These people and ideas ground my own teaching and work and have led me, among other things, to center Ella Jo

Baker in histories of liberatory pedagogy and feature the FST in histories of North American Theater.⁵ Their frequent omission highlights the extent to which certain stories—particularly those of people of color—are spoken over in our historical narratives. It is time to tell new stories.

John O'Neal says, "When we tell stories we are sharing with each other how we put things together" (O'Neal, n.d., para. 7). Indeed, everyone who uses this process has their own story—their own way of putting its history and practice together. The story I have told is not *the* story circles story but only *my* story circles story. In keeping with the spirit of the circle, I am indebted to those I've heard before and look forward to those coming next.

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5. Septima Clark is another civil rights-era organizer who, through her Citizenship Schools, forged a pedagogy much aligned with Baker's. For more, see Clark (1962, 1986) and Charron (2009).

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