

## Who is a Global Citizen?

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### Abstract

Free The Children (FTC) is a youth-driven NGO that calls on participants to end poverty and become global change makers. FTC's success is in part how it appeals to young people in a culturally-sanctioned place where youth can belong to a larger community of like-minded peers. The term 'global citizen' can be found repeatedly throughout FTC's promotional material. This is problematic, as the rhetoric of global citizenship often serves to obscure the North's complicity in perpetuating systems of dominance that ultimately create an imbalance of power between the North and the South. Using FTC's promotional on-line material, this paper will employ a critical rhetorical analysis to explore the ways that the term global citizen is used. Using a model of global citizenship as outlined by Shultz (2007) this paper will explore the way FTC uses rhetoric of global citizenship and how participants are positioned as 'global change makers'.

**Keywords:** Free The Children, global citizen, global citizenship, neo-liberal, critical rhetorical analysis

By raising funds and awareness for overseas development, young people are on the forefront of social change; a generation of passionate global citizens with an unstoppable drive to create stronger communities at home and abroad. (Free The Children, 2013)

### Introduction

Free The Children (FTC) is a youth-driven NGO that calls on participants to end poverty and become global change makers. The organization encourages young people to facilitate lasting global change through a variety of actions that include fundraising, conscious consumerism and 'travel-adventure' trips to the global South. Founded by Craig Kielburger in 1995, FTC has transformed itself from a small group of concerned twelve year olds to a dynamic and captivating NGO that attracts thousands of school aged children across North America and has created partnerships with over eighty school boards and districts across Canada. Young participants in FTC play an important role in the organization. Throughout the organization's promotional materials and events, youth are reminded that they are the generation that will change the world through their actions.

A factor in FTC's success in appealing to young people is that it is a culturally-sanctioned place for youth to explore their identities and gain a sense of belonging, realizing that they matter to a larger community of like-minded peers. This view is supported by Kennelly (2011) who notes that activist youth "to a certain extent seek each other out in order to experience a 'sense of inclusion' and a 'corresponding sense of identity'" (p. 13). While FTC has brought the issues of global poverty and inequality into mainstream consciousness, particularly among young people, the rhetoric of global citizenship contributes to the illusion that global inequities and poverty are issues that can be addressed through simplistic methods, such as fundraising. Although these methods may alleviate specific hardships, they fail to advocate for systemic change.

The term 'global citizen' can be found repeatedly throughout FTC's promotional material. The organization provides opportunities for youth to begin developing as, and engaging in activities that characterize the global citizen, although notably it does not provide a working definition of what constitutes a global citizen. This is problematic, as the rhetoric of global citizenship often serves to obscure the North's complicity in perpetuating systems of dominance that ultimately create an imbalance of power between the North and the South. Throughout FTC's promotional material,

the repetitive references to poverty and the role of the global citizen in eradicating poverty are troubling. People are defined as poor or lacking based on poverty's symptoms but no contextualization of the causes of poverty are included. FTC's lack of attention to the systemic causes of global economic imbalance excuses young people from having to critically reflect on their own privileged positions. The result is that global citizens, in this case FTC members, are only able to address issues of global poverty from 'outside', as poverty is a problem that exists 'out there' to 'other people', reinforcing the binary of 'us' and 'them', and North and South.

Using a model of global citizenship as outlined by Shultz (2007) this paper will explore the way FTC uses the rhetoric of global citizenship and how participants are positioned as 'global change makers'.

## **Literature Review**

### **Global Citizenship**

A considerable body of literature has developed regarding the discourses surrounding global citizenship that are contradictory (Roddick, 2008; O'Byrne, 2003; Dower, 2002). Using FTC's promotional on-line material as a case study, this paper will employ a critical rhetorical analysis to explore the ways that the term global citizen is used to recruit young people to the organization. Given the ubiquity of the term within development discourses and the NGO field, Roddick (2008) highlights the need to examine the concept in detail. Further, O'Byrne (2003) notes that being a global citizen is more than just recognizing or identifying with the world and its people; it is about understanding the dynamic and direct relationship one has with the globe. Others argue that a global citizen takes responsibility for all citizens in the world and accepts a moral obligation to address issues of social inequalities and injustices (Dower, 2002; Noddings, 2005). According to Dower (2002), when someone claims they are a global citizen they are making "some kind of moral claim about the nature and scope of our moral obligations" (p. 146). Further, they accept that they have "obligations in principle towards people in any part of the world; for instance, help[ing] alleviate poverty..." (p. 146). The moral rhetoric of global citizenship is prevalent in the organization FTC and is used as a way of entreating youth to act on global issues.

In contrast to the morally obligated, global citizen is the idea that the global citizen is motivated by economic gain. Byers (2005) notes that some advocates of global citizenship associate that concept with a "capitalist economic system that now dominates the planet" (p. 25). A free market approach to global citizenship decreases the opportunity for individuals to examine their "own country's complicity in the global power game, and the hypocrisies and hollowness of less rigorous or more benevolent conceptions of global citizenship" (p. 30). Further, Shultz (2007) highlights the fact that a neoliberal approach to global citizenship embraces a single global market that encourages people to help those in need through charitable donations, while avoiding an analysis of the power structures that maintain global inequities. The media has also been implicated in playing a key role in developing and maintaining an economically driven global citizen (Urry, 2000). Appealing to the emotions and consumer tendencies of its members, organizations often encourage what Urry (2000) calls 'shallow global citizenship'. He notes that:

[t]he most people want is to be a part of a small community concerned about the plight of the Amazonian rainforest, the war in Bosnia, the famine in Ethiopia, but not cognitively to understand the nature of such events or what might be seriously done to eliminate them. (pp. 181-182)

The construct of the global citizen in both its moral and economic dimensions has also been problematized as the concept has historical linkages to colonizing missions in the global South. Global citizenship may draw on the imperialist mind frame of the global North where perceived

outsiders are welcome so long as they measure up to Northern values and norms (Bowden, 2003). Imperialism is thus advanced through a concept of global citizenship in which Northerners impose their own values, and political and economic systems on the South. The global citizen becomes representative of the North through embracing a neoliberal approach to economic globalization.

Global citizenship remains a contested concept and various tensions are evident in the way it is understood. The notion of global citizenship is complex and cannot be conveyed in a paragraph, an experience or a sound bite. Nonetheless, it is an appealing construct and one that is liberally espoused by FTC in its efforts to recruit youth. This analysis interrogates the disconnection between the shallow moralistic and economic rhetoric of global citizenship espoused in FTC's promotional material and the more critical understandings of the concept reflected in international development scholarship.

## **Methods and Tools**

### **Methodology**

According to Hart and Daughton (2005), the art of rhetoric is to tell a story with a purpose using "common ideas, conventional language, and specific information to influence audiences' feeling and behaviours" (p. 7). To achieve this, the rhetor engages in some basic strategies. First, the rhetor creates change by using verbal and non-verbal methods of communication. Second, the rhetor positions him/herself as helper. Third, in order to create change the rhetor convinces the audience that different choices or actions must be made, providing the audience with limited options that often offer limited information about the required change to be carried out (Hart & Daughton, 2005). A critical rhetorical analysis is useful in showing how FTC uses such strategies to convey messages about global citizenship, helping and social justice in an attempt to engage young people in furthering the work of the organization.

FTC's website provides a useful focal point as the rhetoric in its online material is used to capture the attention of young people and arouse their interest in global social justice. As Hart and Daughton (2005) note, a key rhetorical move is to persuade the audience that a new choice must be made and to then guide and constrain that choice. FTC's website was used as the primary source of data as it provides a comprehensive overview of the history of the organization, the services it provides both domestically and internationally and how individuals may get involved. Further, the website is fully accessible to all and does not require users to provide any personal information before accessing the material. Finally, FTC's website is a rich source of data used to promote the organization including text, images, and video. This analysis uses the material provided on the website to explore the ways in which FTC employs discourses of global citizenship in its efforts to engage young people in international development efforts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Educating for global citizenship has become increasingly prevalent over the last decade, both in schools and among NGOs (Shultz, 2007). The definition of the term and the ways in which it is operationalized, however, vary considerably. Interestingly, despite its frequent use of the term "global citizenship", FTC does not specifically define the meaning of the term in its on-line materials. Using Shultz's (2007) three approaches to conceptualizing global citizenship this analysis will explore how FTC is employing the concept in its efforts to engage young people in the work of the organization.

The first approach Shultz (2007) identifies is the neoliberal, which is grounded in a particular version of global citizenship:

[a]neoliberal approach celebrates the dominance of a single global market and the principles of liberal transnational trade. From this perspective, a global citizen is someone who is a successful participant in a liberal economy driven by capitalism and technology. (p. 249)

Neoliberal approaches celebrate capitalism and free market expansion. Those that are able to successfully participate in the global marketplace are lauded, at the expense of acknowledging issues of unequal power between the North and the South. Hence, those in the North are encouraged to interpret their privileged position as “natural” and a “sign of success” (Shultz, 2007, p. 252), rather than contextualizing their position as an outcome of an intricate system of global and structural inequities. This thinking reinforces the neoliberal drive to increase free markets, positing that the lack of capitalist expansion is the fundamental concern. Hence, Shultz (2007) suggests that a neoliberal approach to aid and intervention may also serve to meet state interests, as it provides the foundation for communities to participate in global economic systems. NGO assistance in the form of aid contributes to removing barriers to modernization, thereby helping to facilitate neoliberal development. Often this help is delivered in the form of workers and, or volunteers of NGOs who travel internationally, bringing an agenda for “global development” (p. 250). In other words, whether intentional or not, neoliberal NGOs directly support the political priorities of the developed world.

The influence of neoliberal thought in these NGOs and the alignment of their approaches to ‘activism’ with the current neoliberal economic trends and policies of the state, may not be readily apparent. According to Shultz (2007), neoliberal global citizens are positioned to support aid efforts through charitable donations to “mitigate the suffering” (p. 252) of those in need. What is discouraged is an analysis of the broader context that perpetuates this ongoing need for aid. In other words, such an approach would likely oppose agendas of social or structural change, instead proposing more targeted acts of charity.

In contrast, a radical approach conceptualizes the role of global citizenship very differently, challenging globalization linked to Western imperialism that “uses economic power for domination” (Shultz, 2007, p. 249). A radical approach focuses on issues of power and access, challenging beliefs that those in the global North can construe their position of privilege as “a natural position and a sign of success” (p. 252). Further, this approach acknowledges the impact of globalization in creating and perpetuating global inequalities. Fundamental to this approach is an understanding of “[h]ow this system [globalization] creates poverty and oppresses most of the world’s population and therefore has a responsibility to challenge state and corporate structures that increase the marginalization of countries in the global south” (p. 249).

Challenging structures that reinforce “the hegemony of economic globalization” (Shultz, 2007, p. 253), as well as structures that perpetuate global inequalities, becomes the primary objective of the radical global citizen. Consequently, this approach prioritizes macro level change, with a focus on challenging such institutions as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization.

A third approach to global citizenship is known as transformational. A transformationalist perspective adopts a broader approach, in which “globalization is understood as cultural, social, environmental, and political as well as economic” (Shultz, 2007, p. 249). Notions of shared humanity are fundamental, emphasizing the global citizens’ connection to others across the world. This perspective acknowledges our “connection to all other people through a common humanity, a shared environment, and shared interests and activities” (p. 249). Hence, the need to value diversity and foster equitable and inclusive relationships across national and international boundaries is

highlighted. A central theme involves “creating democratic spaces for building inclusive community, through action that links the local experience with the shared global experience” (p. 255). The fundamental goal of social justice work from a transformational perspective involves eradicating poverty and is grounded in the belief that “a better world is possible” (p. 255). Using Shultz’s (2007) three models of global citizenship, the remainder of this paper will explore how FTC’s rhetoric encourages young people to become agents of change both locally and globally. The meaning of global citizenship will be explored in the context of the organization’s emphasis on apolitical and consumerist approaches to helping. Finally, the ways in which FTC promotes global connections through selective activities and contact with recipients of aid will be interrogated.

## **Findings**

### **Consumerism as Activism?**

In FTC’s rhetoric, global problems are not the result of global capitalism but rather the problems of individuals that need our help. Such a limited analysis gives rise to a limited range of responses, such as marketing and fundraising campaigns through the purchase of fair trade goods or holiday shopping. By promoting activities such as fundraising and changes in consumption patterns, youth are encouraged simply to ‘get involved’ and feel good about their contributions. Although promoting conscious and informed consumer choices is a positive step, FTC does not go as far as to acknowledge that it may represent only one small step towards change. A limitation of such an approach is that an emphasis on consumer-related participation supports individual actions entrenched within neo-liberal ideology. Individualism shifts young people’s attention from critically reflecting on broader structural issues, such as the global distribution of wealth.

Kennelly (2011) contends that youth activist culture in Canada has become inextricably linked to neoliberalism. “The effects of neoliberalism are felt through its emphasis on self-perfection and identity as expressed through consumption practices” (108). Rose (1999) suggests that notions of the active citizen are increasingly tied to one’s consumption practices. “The citizen is to become a consumer, and his or her activity is to be understood in terms of the activation of the rights of the consumer in the marketplace” (as cited in Kennelly, 2011, p. 102). Such thinking has resulted in a shift in philosophy, transforming social justice efforts traditionally grounded in a collective philosophy to a more individualized approach, which emphasizes self-regulation and adherence to specific consumption practices. Hence, rather than collective efforts being the primary focus, individual actions are accorded primary importance. This consumer orientation is evident on FTC’s website as detailed below.

### **Global Citizens Acting Locally for Global Change**

FTC’s promotional material encourages young people to engage in a variety of activities that create awareness and raise funds while highlighting the impact those actions have when carried out by dedicated ‘global citizens’. After the organization was featured on the American news program 60 Minutes, an invitation to watch the interview with Craig Kielburger was prominently displayed on the organization’s website. Clicking on the link leads the viewer to the interview and subsequently to a “call to action” page highlighting possible fundraising activities. The page also invites viewers to donate, buy products that ‘give back’, or go on a volunteer trip, all of which were featured in the 60 Minutes interview.

Throughout the website, viewers are encouraged to become active global citizens and, through the use of imagery, are reminded of their responsibility as ‘global citizens’ to help change or

save the world. For instance, a photo with young smiling schoolgirls is paired with a link that says “DONATE NOW: Help make an impact with the work you saw on 60 Minutes”. Supporting this call to action is an adjacent image of children’s handprints with the phrase ‘children helping children’. The use of primary colours, childlike handwriting and the word ‘helping’ capitalized and bolded creates feelings of familiarity and connectedness to children in need, capturing the attention of young ‘global citizens’.

Applying Shultz’s (2007) typology of global citizenship FTC’s rhetoric positions participants as ‘transformational’ or ‘neoliberal’ global citizens. The sense of familiarity created through images of childlike handwriting invokes a shared humanity. While a transformational approach to global citizenship is grounded in the desire to reduce poverty and inequalities, this approach is based on a fictitious sense of connectedness between the giver and the receiver. The presence of a “DONATE NOW” prompt allows participants to feel as though they are able to contribute as an individual through a market choice to make a charitable donation. However, in the absence critical analysis of current global power imbalances, giving money or travelling to the global South to build schools or dig wells may be a shallow response, which will not meaningfully contribute to what are more complex problems (Urry, 2000). Such finite contributions, in the absence of any recognition of the contextual reasons for the need for aid will never contribute to more far reaching change.

## **Travel Overseas**

A global citizen participating in FTC sponsored Volunteer Adventures has the opportunity to “see fascinating places, become immersed in new cultures, volunteer in local communities and develop lifelong friendships”. As Simpson (2004) notes, one of the reasons travel-based volunteer programs continue to be popular is the life-changing experiences youth have while abroad. A student who took part on a travel adventure trip was quoted as saying:

I spent 16 days in Kenya, and I can honestly say that those were the best two weeks of my life. There’s something about the beautiful sunsets, exotic wildlife and the incredibly kind-hearted people that captivates you while you’re there and I felt like something I never knew was missing had been found. I think everyone needs to experience something like this trip at some point in their life! (Me to We, 2013)

Roddick (2008) notes that ‘global citizens’ are often “privileged individuals who have the opportunity to learn about the world, often through travel” (p. 55). It is significant to note that individuals participating on a FTC supported excursion pay thousands of dollars to take part in a travel adventure or volunteer trip. Me to We, the facilitators of the trip, even provide fundraising kits to help their participants raise the funds to offset personal cost (Me to We, 2013). According to Simpson (2004), short-term volunteer placements overseas largely benefit young people from the global North.

The individual taking part in a Volunteer Adventure will have the opportunity to “see fascinating places [and] become immersed in new cultures”. Canton and Santos (2009) liken this to “the relationship of colonial anthropologist to the people and cultures they studied: non-Westerners were to be learned about, not with or from” (p. 200). Travelling abroad for the purpose of immersing oneself in new cultures exoticizes the ‘other’ providing a superficial understanding of a group of people, reinforcing difference. Exposing themselves to new foods, music or cultures in a celebratory manner does little to help young people understand “the complexity of the historical relationships between lower-income countries and the West, examinations that are imperative if one is to understand the impact of such relationships and to challenge contemporary global inequalities” (Canton & Santos, 2009, p. 194). Consequently, understanding people from developing countries in

such an essentialized manner “elide[s] the political, economic and cultural differences of the experiences of poverty in various locals” (Jefferess, 2002, p. 13). While FTC’s website does not go into detail about such trips, these seemingly innocent actions construct stereotypical images and reinforce a binary relationship between the developed world and those who are positioned as under-developed. This focus is consistent with the neoliberal ideal of global citizenship as detailed by Shultz (2007), which identifies the ability to travel and move beyond national boundaries. This form of citizenship is “based on a fundamental understanding that as individuals we should be able to move throughout the world freely, enjoying the rewards regardless of national or other boundaries” (p. 252).

### **Connections between Individuals in the Global North and the Global South**

A link to the organization’s YouTube channel highlights a promotional video featuring Canadian singer, songwriter and FTC ambassador Nelly Furtado. In the video, Nelly announces that as a result of a ‘life changing’ trip she took to East Africa earlier in the year, she has decided to donate 1 million dollars to FTC. She explains that the gift is intended to empower girls in Africa and to help build a new girls’ boarding school in Massai Land, Kenya where there isn’t a school like it, so girls she has met can have an education like young people in Canada. After sharing a story of meeting a girl named Susan while on a FTC trip in Africa, Nelly is told by Craig Kielburger that they have arranged a surprise for her. With the crowd erupting in cheers, Susan, a young girl from Kenya who was shown in a video clip earlier and whom Nelly met on her ‘life changing’ travels, is brought up on stage by Craig. The first thing Nelly says to the audience is, “She is wearing her new [school] uniform”.

Nelly Furtado’s words and the actions of FTC, while seemingly well intentioned, are troubling on several fronts, and the creation of the ‘global citizen’ identity requires a closer analysis. To begin, the singer’s recollection of her ‘life changing’ trip to Kenya and declaration that a part of her ‘heart was left in Kenya and she can’t wait to go back, need to be contextualized. These statements express the privilege of a global citizen identity that is achieved through the ability to move freely across borders. Andreotti (2006) notes, “having the choice to traverse from the local to the global space is the determining factor for whether or not you can be a global citizen”(p. 43). Such opportunities and luxuries are often not available to those living in the global South, as individuals often do not have access to the resources required to engage in the same levels of mobility.<sup>1</sup> Second, in her speech Nelly linked fundraising efforts, such as car washes, bake sales and small donations, with young people’s ability to leave ‘their mark on the world’. The ability of the global citizen to leave one’s mark on the world is an action that Andreotti (2006) calls, “a one way transfusion” (p. 43), where an individual’s impact is seen as moving in only in one direction, North to South.

FTC followers are regularly reminded that they are the change that the world is waiting for and it is up to them to lift people out of poverty. One way for this to happen is through education. One of the most common activities for youth travelling abroad with the organization is building schools in selected communities - a sure way for young people to leave their mark on the world. In dominant understandings of development, education is viewed as a universal equalizer, a way of removing barriers that lead to an impoverished existence. Northern patterns of schooling are considered complementary to economic growth and development. However, by promoting Northern influenced education, the ‘global citizen’ once again engages in actions that move in a

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<sup>1</sup> Resources may include financial resources, proper documentation, nation-state approval via immigration, or infrastructure that allows for effortless cross border movement.

singular direction, from the North to the South, hence imposing the Northern knowledge system onto others. Further, by using education as a tool to transmit particular worldviews, education serves to assimilate students into a shared understanding defined by those in power (Zemach-Bersin, 2007). Nelly exemplifies this when she tells the audience at We Day that she wants the girls she met in Kenya to “have an education like all of you have in Canada.” Dobson (2005) argues that a relationship between the giver and the receiver built on such a moral basis, contributes to unequal and paternalistic relations, adding to the vulnerability of the recipient. This paternalistic relationship is highlighted when Nelly proclaims her excitement that Susan is wearing her new school uniform.

It could be argued that Susan herself is a global citizen because of her ability to travel beyond her own national borders. However, Susan’s ability to act globally is only made possible by the apparent intervention of FTC. Becoming a global citizen depends on whether or not an individual has the “choice to traverse from the local to the global space” (Andreotti, 2006, p. 43) and who is in a position to project “their local (assumptions and desires) as everyone else’s global” (Dobson, 2005, p. 264). Thus, FTC is in a privileged position to extend its generosity and help, while Susan is positioned to be dependent on the organization’s help.

### **Conclusion**

It is extremely encouraging that FTC recognizes young people as potential global citizens and is working to establish means by which they can participate in the public sphere. However, while youth are bestowed with the designation of ‘global citizen’, to be a global citizen in the radical or transformational sense would require them to be equipped with a stronger analysis of global injustice than FTC appears to provide. To truly reflect a radical or transformational approach, participants would need to demonstrate awareness and understanding of the broader political, economic, social and cultural contexts. When asked “What is the We Act Program?”, FTC provides the following answer:

Free The Children’s We Act program inspires a generation to care about the issues that affect our communities and our world, and provides the practical tools needed to turn that inspiration into action. We Act puts students at the forefront of active citizenship by educating them on social issues and action planning, developing leadership skills and engaging them in world-changing action. (We Day, 2013)

Although FTC encourages active citizenship and world changing action through education on social issues, the organization’s rhetoric obscures the superficial way in which global citizenship is operationalized. Based on Shultz’s (2007) conceptualization of the term, FTC’s approach reflects a neoliberal understanding. For example, FTC’s statement that it “provides the practical tools needed to turn that inspiration into action” is largely grounded in consumer based choices. As previously mentioned, such actions manifest in the purchase of Me to We products, fundraising campaigns and volunteer adventure tours. Additionally, the privileged identity of global citizen is reinforced by young people’s ability to gain specific skills such as leadership and communication, as well as increased confidence, which helps them to demonstrate cultural capital in university and college applications and job interviews.

FTC’s operationalization of education on social issues and engagement on world changing actions appear to be similarly neoliberal in its approach. The emphasis of the organization’s online promotional material appears to be on raising awareness of global inequities. Participants are primarily educated about the fact that poverty exists but the structural reasons for the persistence of economic inequities are never interrogated. FTC’s approach to world-changing actions is consistent with this neoliberal understanding of social issues, consisting primarily of working within existing



structures. As Shultz (2007) notes, the radical and transformative approaches would deem such actions limited, as they do nothing to challenge broader structures that serve to perpetuate entrenched systemic global inequities.

It is widely acknowledged that the majority of the world's population is subject to the political and economic forces that originate in Northern cities and boardrooms (Karlberg, 2008). Scholars have argued that global citizenship is a concept used to denote citizens from a globalized Northern world. Historically, Eurocentric privilege has enabled Northern individuals to universalize their own experiences and identities, projecting them as universal norms (Bowden, 2003; Karlberg, 2008). Hence, it is imperative that we are critically attuned to the ways that Northern youth are portrayed as global citizens and how this can be steeped in imperialism, perpetuating power and privilege over the global South.

FTC's contention that it promotes global citizenship is puzzling, given the lack of evidence from the website of a strong focus on fostering critical awareness of global social justice issues among its participants. Rather than helping young people develop the skills to contextualize injustice, the organization's primary activities tend to focus on less ambitious projects intended to promote good feelings among the global helpers. Throughout its promotional materials, there is little evidence that participants are challenged to consider their positioning in the more affluent North. As Jefferess (2012) argues, it is important to question the extent to which global citizenship pedagogy continues to enshrine "colonial frameworks of identity and difference, as well as neoliberal social and economic ideology" (p. 19). Instead, FTC positions youth as benevolent global citizens. Implicit in these messages is the positioning of Northerners as 'saviours' of the impoverished people of the South. Consequently, FTC participants are rarely confronted with uncomfortable questions of their own complicity.

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