Addressing Structural Violence Through US Reconciliation Commissions:
The Case Study of Greensboro, NC and Detroit, MI.

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ABSTRACT:

Across the United States, communities encumbered by violence, economic injustice, legacies of oppression and continued social, economic, and political marginalization are increasingly turning towards truth and reconciliation commissions (TRC) to address and remedy persistent inequality. While modeled after the international truth movement, TRCs in the United States are often not state-sanctioned and characterized by fundamental differences that beg the question: *How are peace and justice dialectically linked to, and flow from geographic specific understandings of violence?* Drawing from the TRC experiences of Greensboro (NC) and Detroit (MI), this paper examines the way communities that were burdened with a history of violence are turning towards TRCs as viable vehicles for addressing violence and inequality in contemporary US society. This paper furthers our understanding of the geographic ruptures violence creates in communities and the often hidden realities that the legacy and memory of violence has for oppressed people in the United States.

Key Words: Truth Commissions; Restorative Justice; Neoliberalism; Violence; Racism; Peace Studies.

In November of 2011 several hundred people from across the metro-Detroit region crowded into Cobo Hall in downtown Detroit to witness and celebrate the empaneling of the "Metropolitan Detroit Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (MDTRC). The atmosphere was electric as nine commissioners took their oaths, read aloud their mandate and began their work. The MDTRC is charged with investigating regional segregation and the effects that segregation had in the 1967 Detroit Uprising. Colloquially referred to as the "Detroit Riot," the uprising began after white police officers raided several African American after-hours clubs on 23 July 1967. After an altercation, members of the African American community began to protest aggressive police tactics in the city, leading to unrest in which wide swaths of the city were destroyed over several days. While long blamed for contemporary Detroit's decline (urban blight, white flight, and poor race relations) the uprising has deeper implications. It was the hope of the MDTRC that the commission would provide a venue to understand the conditions that gave rise to segregation in the city and the continuing significance of the now almost fifty year old uprising for those who live in the city and the region.

For commissioners, ministers, activists, and local residents the results of the commission's work were disappointing. Over the first year, commitment waned as three commissioners resigned their positions (one person transferred jobs to another state and two others resigned over disagreements with the mandate and focus of the commission). The commission was criticized for ignoring Detroit's grassroots organizations at the expense of regional players whose motivations were seen as suspect. Additionally, the work that the commission has accomplished has been overwhelmed by Detroit declaring bankruptcy (the largest municipal bankruptcy proceedings in the history of the United

States), controversial plans by billionaire Dan Gilbert to redevelop downtown, and the election of Detroit's first white mayor since the 1970s. The disappointment over the truth commission's progress is exacerbated by comparisons with another truth commission, in Greensboro, North Carolina, that completed its mission and is seen as far more successful in its work and vision.

The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) was formed in 2000 in response to the murder of labor and civil rights organizers in 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina by members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In 1999 local community organizers began advocating for a truth and reconciliation commission modeled after the international truth movement, most notably the truth commission in South Africa and Peru. After securing funding, seating commissioners, and taking testimony from survivors, perpetrators of violence, and local citizens and officials the GTRC released its report. The commission in Greensboro is a model for other communities wishing to engage with and in *truth work* in the United States.

While the disappointments with Detroit and the direction of its commission are unique to the metro-Detroit region, other aspects of the struggle, when compared with Greensboro and the GTRC, are indicative of fundamental tensions peace and justice activists must confront when dealing with the legacy of racism and the consequences of violence. More specifically the failures of the Detroit commission draws attention to contradictions that challenge activists who want to forge new understandings and materialities of justice by connecting violent events with ongoing racialized inequities. In order to achieve their goals, activists must effectively confront legacies, memories, and ongoing realities of violence that establishment forces in the United States are loathe to

revisit. Thus the MDTRC and the GTRC present compelling opportunities to examine place-based physical and structural violence and begs the question: *How are peace and justice materially linked to, and flow from, geographically contextual experiences, expressions, and examinations of violence within communities?*

To address this question this paper proceeds with the following sections. First, we address the broader literature associated with the Truth and Reconciliation movement. This section draws distinctions between the international truth movement and domestic US truth movement focusing on the "unofficial" nature of the US effort at reconciliation. Following this discussion the manuscript proceeds to engage with the changing nature of violence within neoliberal modes of production. Critically we argue that neoliberal modes of production are predicated on the retreat of the state from social service provision and have opened up spaces for grassroots activists to engage in reconciliation processes. This has implications not only for the way social scientists understand violence, but also for the way the social sciences conceive of the work of peace. To address the overarching research question the authors have engaged in an in depth qualitative analysis that includes interviews, participant observation and archival research. Interviews were open-ended, with questions guiding the conversation along a series of themes, including the participant's personal involvement in the truth process, their conceptions of justice, and their hopes and reservations about the reconciliation process. We conclude by offering some remarks about the role of peace in understandings of violence.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions:

Conventional truth and reconciliation commissions have been organized in a number of countries that have undergone periods of violence and oppression, such as post-Apartheid South Africa, or war-torn Uganda (e.g. Lerner, 2007; Hamber, 2006; Ross, 2004; Chandler, 2003; Handy, 2003; Nevins, 2003; Verwoerd, 2003). Historically, truth commissions are "bodies set up to investigate a past history of violations of human rights in a particular country," and are usually sponsored by some governmental organization (Hayner, 1994, p. 600). While the TRC structure and mandate is flexible, truth commissions generally "operate for a specific time, with a mandate to address human rights violations that occurred during a determined period in a nation's history" (Ross, 2004, p. 73). Proponents of truth commissions argue for "reconciliation between former adversaries as well as [facilitate a] transition to a more just, democratic, and peaceful political order" (Nevins, 2003, p. 677). Additionally, TRC processes are seen as an effort to restore fractured civil relationships in societies that continue to experience the consequences of violence (Philpott, 2006). This includes a range of policy options including forgiveness, a focus on creating more democratic conditions, and the reconstitution of political communities (Murphy, 2010).

A key component of the truth and reconciliation process focuses on peace building. Peace building encompasses a wide variety of activities, but the main focus is to prevent the outbreak, recurrence, or continuance of violence (Borer, 2006, p. 12). Borer argues that it takes both negative and positive tasks to build a lasting peace. Negative tasks focus on the *prevention* of violence. These can include peacekeepers, criminal proceedings and the removal of repressive political regimes. Positive tasks are those that encourage the growth of social, political, and legal institutions that *ameliorate* the

underlying causes of conflict and violence (Borer, 2006, p. 14). These can include measures that create new legal frameworks and interpretations, support for political institutions, and revitalization of social and economic practices (Borer, 2006, p. 15). While some truth and reconciliation commissions have negative peace building tasks as integral to their mandate (e.g. the prosecution of war crimes), such commissions also nearly always have positive peace building tasks as well. Thus truth commissions play a primary role in addressing “structural violence.” However another, often equally critical, goal is to facilitate the creation of a “positive peace” which requires “some degree of socioeconomic justice and equality” (Rigby, 2001, p. 11).

The path to building this positive peace, however, is anything but straightforward and is fraught with tensions. Critically a relationship exists between positive and negative peace and it is that tension and relationship that is central to understanding how reconciliation processes proceed (Lerner, 2007). For example, truth and reconciliation efforts that provide immunity to perpetrators of violence, a "positive" attempt to avoid the potentially harmful effects of putting community members through the penal system, may ultimately call into question the validity of the whole process for those whose vision of justice includes state-sanctioned retribution (Bassiouni, 1997). Such tensions animate international truth commissions and often serve as the basis for political compromise brought about by evolving notions of reconciliation.

The truth movement in the United States departs from these conventional understandings in several important ways. As we argue, the truth and reconciliation movement in the United States serves as an important departure point for problematizing notions of transitional justice and focuses on the ways oppressed people are trying to

harness the rhetorical and discursive power of truth commissions to grapple with materially grounded oppressive conditions. Furthermore we argue that this reality in the US is a result of neoliberal modes of production that have structurally changed the political economy of the United States. Given the limitations imposed on United States TRC movements because of their "unofficial" nature, the efforts of domestic TRCs are meant to give oppressed groups "an understanding of both institutions and apparatuses, an understanding of law, and also an understanding of techniques for their application with the framework determined by the state" (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 53). Though reconciliation movements in the United States are not officially sanctioned, they *are* important vehicles for communities to illuminate geographies of unequal access and patterns of institutional discrimination while also giving participants the tools necessary to disrupt those processes. Therefore, rather than being a state-driven process, the United States transitional justice movement intentionally works in tension with the state as a grassroots organizing strategy.

Magarrell and Wesley (2008) note that TRC processes in the United States are usually begun after a period of community activism, when it becomes increasingly clear that state authorities are either uninterested in the events, or potentially complicit in the violence that occurred. As a consequence most of the TRCs in the United States are met with official indifference or even hostility. This makes it difficult for TRCs in the United States to engage in many of the *negative* peace tasks associated with international reconciliation tribunals that require cooperation from the state criminal justice system. Nor would they necessarily want to engage in that system, as, in the United States context, the criminal justice system is often intimately connected with the ongoing

production of oppressed communities (Author 2014, Gilmore 2002, 1999). Point-in-fact, in Greensboro, survivors wrote an open letter to state and local prosecutors asking that new information that could lead to criminal charges be ignored and the local authorities were asked to give immunity to those who testified. After some debate the local authorities declined this request. However, as the executive director of the GTRC explained during an open-ended research interview:

In Greensboro we did not really work on or through immunity. Some of the survivors sent letters to local prosecutors requesting it, but nothing much came of it. So in that sense amnesty was never really part of our process in Greensboro, so our process was modeled after South Africa's, more in terms of that truth is a necessary prerequisite for reconciliation, and also in terms of the process of finding justice.

The reality that immunity is not part of the truth movement in Greensboro is central to understanding differences between the United States-based truth movement and the international transitional justice movement. In doing so, US activists with the TRC argue they are using the broader framework of the international transitional justice movement to enact forms of justice that are situated to specific geographic conditions in the United States, particularly those marked with legacies of racialized violence. Importantly, political geographers are afforded a window into the geographic conditions that exist on the ground in United States communities as activists harness the discursive power of the international TRC movement and seek political change through reconciliation.

An organizer with the Detroit TRC built on this theme when she stated in our open-ended research interview: "The brilliance of taking this particular form of

restorative justice is that it creates a space for conversations to be had; to give those who are most impacted to tell us what their pain is like. We need to know where the real pain lies, and where the tension is in order to have any kind of real change in policy or in process." By arguing that TRCs create space for conversations and connections, the organizer in Detroit is pointing out that one of the first keys in justice activism and work is getting participants to sit down with one another to engage fully in a process that can create the conditions necessary for organizing work to occur.

United States based TRC bodies begin with events that might conventionally be considered "history"--in the past, and often viewed by the broader community as irrelevant to contemporary conditions. However, the point is to uncover and problematize how past events and their unresolved tensions contribute to ongoing structural, social and economic inequalities that impact oppressed groups in the United States. Throughout the many contexts where truth commissions take place in the United States, organizers connect violent events to structures of ongoing racism and inequality. TRCs are useful for developing long-term commitments to anti-racist ideas and organizations. Given the structural conditions in the United States where local, state and federal governments are not interested in taking histories and geographies of violence seriously the TRC structure provides a framework that can advocate for justice that hinges on an "official" process that is external to those formal systems

Neoliberal Violence and the Workings of United States Truth Commissions:

As noted, key to understanding the TRC movement in the US is the way these commissions engage with actually existing, on the ground conditions of violence. Increasingly in the United States this means engaging with the realities of neoliberalism

and the particular forms of violence neoliberalism takes. As neoliberal imperatives of capital accumulation have come to predominant within the United States, the rationality of the violence on which it rests comes to be justified through "a common code of conduct featuring deregulated markets, free trade, and shared legal norms among states that promote civic liberties, electoral processes, and representative institutions" (Springer, 2011, p. 95). Within a United States context the rise of neoliberalism is "connected to a series of economic and political crises" that weakened the Keynesian state (Author, p. 4). As the crises deepened throughout the later half of the Twentieth Century the underlying structure of neoliberal violence evolved. A nation that had for most of its history been characterized by overt white supremacist violences (Gilmore 1999) transformed itself and those violences became interwoven into United States society in different kinds of ways. In other words, the overt racism of the past became the coded racism of multicultural liberalism (Melamed 2011). The realities manifest themselves in a variety of contexts, but are most visible in the expansion of militarized policing and imprisonment together with the rollback of the welfare state that has created a dystopian urban future (Gilmore 1999; 2002; Loyd 2014).

What makes the shifting terrain of neoliberal violence so powerful is the way neoliberalism interacts with both local and external forces that operate within the global economy and can tailor violent responses towards the individual community (Springer, 2011, p. 95). This is a process that entails a "killing me softly" approach in which the "viciousness of the violent structures necessary to uphold the system are hidden just beneath the tranquil façade [and upheld] through a series of dehumanizing

rationalizations and Sunday sermons" (Goldberg 2009, p. 69) on personal responsibility and individual freedom.

However, by turning away from basic social service provisions and the social welfare of its citizens, a contradiction has been opened for citizens to rethink their relationship to the state. It is this gap the United States reconciliation movement tries to fill. Perhaps more importantly, this has opened up new terrain to rethink and reimagine notions of justice and equality. As the state's priorities have shifted under neoliberalism, space has opened for average citizens to take charge of their own communities. Importantly, we are not suggesting that social scientists should uncritically reiterate capital and the state's terms of abandonment. These realities should and need to be contested. Instead we are suggesting that the roots of neoliberalism's ultimate demise lie in the ways everyday citizens in the face of state abandonment are able to refashion and reimagine their communities to create conditions for a more just and peaceful existence. This has implications not only for the way the social sciences understand violence, but also for how geographers come to engage with peace and how to achieve it through grassroots organizing in the United States.

In the retreat of the social welfare state, it is important for peace and justice movements to create forms of intervention that have transformative potential toward and may stand in opposition to state/society relations. In describing the struggle for peace and justice, Harvey argues that what is needed for the transformation of society is the "construction of a new paradigm for social geographic thought through a deep and profound critique of our existing analytical constructs" (2009, p., 144). This transformation relies on changing ideas about rights from a focus on individuals, to a

collective notion of rights that is focused on the creative potential inherent in bottom up struggles for more just and equitable futures.

In each of the United States TRC moments, groups of oppressed people are struggling both to hold the state accountable for past failures to protect their well-being and to affect future democratic change. This speaks to a central contradiction that oppressed peoples in the United States encounter as they struggle to survive in the face of state sanctioned neglect. Purcell explains that traditional views on state formation and those which flow from Hobbes and Locke hold that in exchange for giving up much of their own self-governing power to the state, citizens are supposed to get in return security (Purcell, 2013, p. 7). However, within the context of neoliberal modes of production, "violence" is a set of practices in which those that are defined as unnecessary for capital accumulation are expunged from society, left to fend for themselves. The promise of the state's goodwill is systematically unfulfilled. The structure of TRCs is attractive because it allows local activists to take advantage of this contradiction by grounding their engagement in local conditions while simultaneously discursively connecting to a larger international process that lends legitimacy and political structure. Local activists are harnessing the power of the international TRC movement through local grassroots and democratic politics. In doing so, they are creating a process that attempts to convert the retreat by state actors from basic social service provisions into an opportunity to reimagine politics and local political coalitions.

This reality holds particular purchase for geographers who have begun to take peace studies more seriously; debates around the meaning and understanding of peace have also increased. (e.g., Springer, forthcoming, McConnell et al. 2014; Loyd, 2012;

Megoran, 2010; Ross, 2011; Pepper and Jenkins, 1983). A major impediment to the understanding of peace is that the term is not only hard to define, it can mean significantly different things to people in different places and contexts (Koopman, 2011). In other words, "Peace(s) are always shaped in and through the space and times through which they are made. Peace is not a static thing, nor an endpoint, but a socio-spatial relation that is always made and made again (Koopman, 2011)." Importantly, this understanding shifts the focus from peace as a *thing* to be achieved, to peace as a *process* that engages with "issues of power and politics and opens up questions of contingency, agency and embodiment" (Williams and McConnell, 2011, p. 929). Peace must be defined in distinct, geographically contingent ways and our definitions must be focused on how different groups come to know, understand, experience, and ultimately work toward more peaceful futures. In other words, it is the way peace varies according to unique sets of circumstances and specific geographies that gives peace its differential meanings. Importantly, our understandings of what peaceful futures look like must be dialectically linked with how groups are oppressed and as a consequence the social sciences must engage with questions that are specifically related to the materiality of how oppressed groups are actively working to transform their reality. It is not enough to be opposed to un-peaceful conditions, but instead it is necessary to engage with the messiness of resistance where justice is the definite goal (Harvey, 2009, p. 183).

CASE STUDY: Greensboro, North Carolina and Detroit, Michigan

On 3 November 1979 labor and anti-racist organizers in Greensboro, North Carolina gathered in Morningside Homes, a public housing project in downtown Greensboro. The labor activists were gathered to host an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally in the

project and to raise awareness of their efforts to unionize textile mills in Greensboro and rally participants wanted to bring attention to the way the Klan had historically impeded unionization in North Carolina. The organizers were attempting to highlight the way a newly resurgent Klan in the area was becoming increasingly militarized. As rally participants gathered to prepare for the march, a caravan carrying approximately 37 Klan and American Nazi Party members (referred to hereafter as the Klan), including at least one police informant, drove through the community.

Suddenly a Klan vehicle lurched at a Morningside resident and a physical altercation erupted as [labor activists] and Klan members fought in the streets with fists, clubs and knives. At the same time Mark Sherer, a member of the Klan, leaned out of the window of the lead caravan vehicle and fired a shot from a .45 caliber black powder pistol into the air while simultaneously shouting “Shoot the niggers!” (Author, 2011, pg. 2)

Sally Bermanzohn, a November 3rd survivor describes in her oral history/memoir what proceeded:

I was close to where the Klansman fired the first shot. I ducked between two cars. From where I crouched, I saw Mike Nathan loping along a brick building away from the shot. Should I follow him? I decided to stay put, a decision that may have saved my life. [as she crouched down] Shot after shot rang out. I looked toward the truck where I had seen the first gun fired, but the truck wasn't there anymore. The shots were now coming from the opposite direction, from the back of the caravan. Later, I realized that the first shot had gotten people like Mike to run the wrong way—into the gunfire [...] I could see several Klansman there [at

the rear of the Klan column], firing weapons with careful aim. The KKK gunmen were relaxed and took their time. It seemed like forever before they drove off (Bermanzohn, 2003, pg. 215).

In less than two minutes organizers Sandy Smith, Bill Sampson, Ceaser Cause, and Drs. Michael Nathan and James Waller lay dead. Nine others had been wounded.

Interestingly and importantly, local television news crews who were on scene covering the rally captured all of the events on video. Despite the video evidence of the Klan and Nazis firing directly into a crowd of fleeing protestors no Klan or Nazis were ever held criminally liable for the five deaths, and, in fact, the Klan and Nazis were acquitted in state murder trials (Author 2012; 2011).

In 1999 survivors and local activists began advocating for a truth commission at the twenty-year anniversary of the shooting. The Greensboro TRC wanted to focus on the long-term impacts the events of 3 November had in the local community. In our interview the executive director of the GTRC explained that the community in Greensboro was still struggling not only to come to terms with 3 November, but also the fact that the events continued to divide people who had a common interest in working with each other. This was particularly problematic in Greensboro's progressive community as a number of struggles stumbled over past interpretations of the events of 3 November and distrust in the community over who and what went on during the Klan-led violence. As a consequence there remained unresolved issues of police accountability, poverty and low wages, lack of employment. If the community was going to move forward, GTRC organizers argued that the events of 3 November should and must be

dealt with. It is in this context that the GTRC began their work towards restorative justice.

In explaining the Greensboro effort one of the TRC commissioners stated: "November 3, 1979 was just one of millions of acts of violence perpetrated by racism, hatred and greed...the outcome of the three trials confirmed the acceptance of this type of behavior by those in power in our society. Thus the need for a democratic process such as ours: not governed by any legal body" (as quoted in Magarell and Wesley, 2008, p. 93). This commissioner is speaking about the effort of organizers to incorporate as many diverse voices into the TRC as possible in order to create a commission that reflected the local community. Just as neoliberal, racist, ablest and patriarchal forms of oppression mean different things depending on where one lives, how the social sciences come to experience peaceful lives and futures also differs. Put another way, "[s]tructures of domination shape everyday existence, but an insightful understanding of these structures and their recurring contradictions can assist people in forcefully resisting oppression" (Feagin, 2000, p. xii).

In 1967 Detroit was the scene of a "race riot" that destroyed wide swaths of the city. The spark that touched off the Detroit Uprising was the reaction of the local African American community to the increasingly militarized Detroit police force and concomitant incidents of police brutality (Sugrue, 1996, p. 259). This reality, coupled with regional racism, and a burgeoning housing and economic crisis as manufacturing jobs moved from the city to the suburbs, resulted in one of the largest and most brutal uprisings in US history. In response President Lyndon Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission to investigate the causes of the uprising. Led by Illinois Senator Otto Kerner, the

commission was tasked with trying to understand the causes of the riot and to come up with policies that might prevent future urban strife. While much of the academic and popular accounts of the Kerner Commission begin and end with the famous line, "our nation is moving toward two unequal societies, one black, one white," the commission's recommendations are more instructive.

The Kerner Commission recommended that the national government take action to create two million new jobs in an effort to "absorb the hard-core unemployed" and to create job training programs to enrich the lives of the underserved in US cities. Second, the commission argued that the US welfare system should be expanded, stating the welfare system of the 1960s was "designed to save money instead of people." Included in the report's recommendations was a call to end residency requirements to broaden participation in the welfare system. Far from arguing for a state abandonment of the poor and disenfranchised who made up many of the rioters, the commission recommended billions of dollars of new federal spending to create economic development, alleviate housing shortages and to educate poor children in the city. Those communities who participated in the riot were seen not necessarily as violent offenders; instead, the uprising was seen as a consequence of social, political, and economic inequality and participants were portrayed in the report as victims of this inequality. The Kerner Commission recommended intervening in Detroit, and countless other places, in an effort to alleviate the structural conditions that can produce violence.

What parallels Greensboro are the ways these intervention strategies were ignored by policy makers, or worse read as illegitimate. Almost immediately the Kerner Commission's report was met with political opposition as United States' politicians tried

to use the report to portray mainstream liberalism as lawless. Additionally, and potentially more problematically, the report was twisted and was used to portray African American urban dwellers as "dangerous" and urban United States as out of control. These efforts fit within a broader history in the United States in which the claims of oppressed people are rendered irrelevant, and in this sense the aftermath of the Detroit uprising mirrors that history and geography. In a similar way to Greensboro, the claims of the protestors were rendered illegitimate, complicating their claims for and to justice (Author 2012).

In Greensboro there was an effort by the local authorities to discredit the labor activists by portraying them as "outsiders" who were looking for a confrontation. The "outsider" narrative has long played an important role in US political discourse and was a prominent discourse during the battles over social and economic justice in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. "Opponents of the Civil Rights Movement were constantly branding Civil Rights activists as outsiders, more often than not portraying them as under the influence of communist agents that tied into Cold War discourses" (Author 2011).

The subtext to these discursive strategies is the way they come to mask particular forms of violence that are connected to the maintenance and reinforcement of class and race based social orders that were coming under assault at this time. The backdrop to Detroit and Greensboro is that each of these violent incidents occurred during economic transitions that radically altered social, political and economic structures. In Detroit the uprising occurred at the very moment automakers, the backbone of Detroit's economy, were transitioning out of the city and moving their factories first to the suburbs and later overseas (Sugrue, 1996). As this was occurring many of the white autoworkers moved

with the jobs and the surrounding suburban communities populations exploded. For African American autoworkers the situation was dire. Southeast Michigan was historically surrounded by a web of "sundown towns;" cities and towns that had laws in place that forbade African Americans from living or residing in the town after the sun went down (Lowen, 2005). As a result African American residents were forced to compete for fewer jobs. Coupled with a hyper-militarized police force, racial tensions were high. It was this underlying structural change that laid the foundation for the explosion of racial tensions during the '67 uprising. In late 1970s's Greensboro similar economic transitions were occurring. Long the center of textile manufacturing during the late 1970s and early 1980s the mills that had dominated Greensboro's skyline were in trouble. Facing increased pressure from overseas manufacturers, many of the mills began to close or move their operations overseas. Coupled with increased labor tensions and the effort to unionize the mills, the mill operators were in crisis. Central to understanding these two case studies is the way capitalism often masks the social exploitation and alienation on which the system of capital accumulation rests.

Take for example the contemporary situation in Detroit. In the winter of 2013 Detroit was on the verge of bankruptcy; the State of Michigan appointed an emergency manager to run the city in an effort to contain the crisis. In appointing the emergency manager, the state usurped the local government, stripping much of the power away from the democratically elected mayor and city council. In addition, when the emergency manager law was created, it gave power to void city contracts and health and retirement plans (Davey, 2013, p. A1). An article in the local newspaper made plain the significance. The *Detroit News* wrote: "facing mounting debt and the prospect of a state-

appointed emergency manager, the city is looking to shed most of its most venerable assets--from Belle Isle [an historic park in the city and a focal point of city activities] to the Detroit Windsor Tunnel [a major artery between Canada and the United States]" (Nichols, 2012, p. A1).

Additionally recent census figures show that Detroit, once the fourth largest city in the United States, has lost a quarter of its population in the last ten years. As a consequence a contingent of consultants have gone through the city --tracking population densities, sewer lines, disease and foreclosed homes. "The goal is to identify the strongest, most viable neighborhoods, which would receive extra attention and help from the city. The residents of the weakest, emptiest neighborhoods would be encouraged to move into [strong neighborhoods]" (*New York Times*, 2011, p. A14). While Detroit cannot compel residents to move, over the course of the next several years the city plans to curtail municipal services to those neighborhoods deemed unhealthy, undesirable, or just unnecessary. For example, trash service in "healthy" neighborhoods will continue to be every week while in neighborhoods identified as not-functioning trash service would be every two or three weeks. Also, city services like street lights, sewer and water services, will be privatized with no guarantee that those services will continue in neighborhoods that are superfluous to the city's development vision.

This plan dovetails with efforts by local private developers to remake the downtown area. The most significant project is led by billionaire Dan Gilbert who has spent over \$1 billion acquiring real-estate in downtown Detroit (Segal, 2013, p. B1). His efforts include plans to turn downtown into a hub of high-tech companies that would attract young professionals who would live and work in the city. As part of his plans the

city has streamlined permit processes and have agreed to give him a "largely free hand" with the former Mayor of Detroit proclaiming "My job is to knock down as many barriers as possible and get out of the way" (as quoted in Segal, 2013, p. BU1). This statement is significant when juxtaposed against the backdrop of the Kerner commission's recommendations for developing a healthy city. Whereas the Kerner commission focused on investments in social welfare programs designed to lift people out of poverty, Mayor Bing and downtown developers clearly view the residents themselves as *the problem*, and as a consequence they must be removed from the urban landscape of the city. Unsurprisingly one of the most significant investments downtown has been in security. As the *New York Times* explains, "in a command center in Chase Tower [one of Mr. Gilbert's properties] a bank of monitors are watched by security guards, with live feeds from video cameras downtown. These guards keep an eye on what is actually one of the safest parts of the city" (ibid). These descriptions connect with Harvey's (2005, p. 181) observations that to live under neoliberalism means to live in a society in which "the inalienable rights of individuals to private property and the profit rate trump any other conception of inalienable rights you can think of."

The plans of the city and local developers are not without critics. A minister and local activist in Detroit described the implications of these changes over the course of our interview. He noted that between the emergency manager law, the shuttering of neighborhoods and efforts of local developers, that what was going on in the city was "the largest land grab in state [of Michigan's] history, at least since white folks took all this land away from Native Americans in the eighteenth century." A long-time community activist in Detroit summed up her reaction to the emergency manager and

efforts at redevelopment this way: "when you think about the onslaught toward the emergency manager and redevelopment in downtown, it is as though the forces of power and privilege that have been so destructive to so much of the city, were you know, kind of like vultures coming back full scale, to feast on the carcass of the city." She goes on to note that the primary discourse about the city that is driving the redevelopment plans is that the city is dysfunctional and that the dysfunction is the fault of the residents and city government. She notes:

When I opened the paper this morning and I see folks talking about the emergency manager, and they talk about the fact that this is needed because the people who are running the city are messing it up, dragging their feet, pulling it down, that narrative is the dominant narrative in the region, which basically says that Detroiters are incapable, that they have nothing to offer, that they cannot run the city, and this completely [erases] the responsibility on the part of laws and lawmakers [for Detroit's contemporary crisis].

These insights --that contemporary discourses around Detroit's crisis and redevelopment constitute a land grab, and also blame residents and local government while absolving the powerful--is significant because it highlights the changing nature of violence under neoliberalism. Recall that in the aftermath of the 1967 Detroit uprising an imperative of the federally mandated Kerner Commission was focused on ameliorating the causes of the uprising through the power of the state to invest in significant economic development schemes.

In contrast, in the midst of Detroit's contemporary crisis it is the focus of the state to remove from the landscape anyone who is considered not to belong, or more precisely

considered to threaten private capital and their redevelopment schemes. Within the city, conditions that have lead to neoliberal redevelopment intersect with long histories of racism and racial exploitation. Thus the violence of the state and private capital is wrapped up in the discourse of unproductive citizens or in the idea that society is composed of "takers" and "producers." Takers in Detroit seem to almost always refer to black and brown bodies, despite the fact that those same bodies have been struggling for decades to protect and hold on to their neighborhoods, schools and civic institutions. That such conditions have characterized wide swaths of United States history and geography is unsurprising, but the way neoliberal violence justifies the transformation of space by playing on local discourses that fuel fear of the "other" is inherently geographical. Goldberg explains:

Those recalcitrant states or population factions not willing to support or which resist the neoliberal political economy of structural adjustment, debt creation, and regulation are subjected to more direct forces of militarized or policed imposition. In the extreme, "Uncooperative," "rogue," or unruly populations (states, communities, groups, individuals) are subjected to necropolitical discipline through the threat of imprisonment or death physical or social. Those forces of unruliness--those taken to be unbounded by the force of law--are likewise defined through racial extension and rearticulation (Goldberg, 2009, p. 334).

Under neoliberal modes of production, the state deploys violences through the remaking of space that fundamentally orients that violence towards particular peoples, in an effort to facilitate continued capital accumulation.

Truth and Reconciliation in Detroit, were a process ever to come to fruition, would be an opportunity for ordinary people in the city to articulate their experiences under the growth of the neoliberal regime in the region. What is missing from the Emergency Manager's plans, and the Mayor's plans, and the vision for modern Detroit, is a venue to analyze and express the connections between the city's current crises and the social and economic processes that created the conditions for inequality and underdevelopment in Detroit's present moment. This, we argue, is fundamentally what United States based TRC's are attempting to do, which is make connections between broad structural changes, violence and the impact on those made most vulnerable to those changes. The Detroit commission's original mandate was to examine the roots and impacts of the riots of 1967: what were the conditions that caused people to revolt? How did those revolts impact the future of the city? Our examination of the Kerner Commission's findings, however, reveal that even in the face of social scientific authority deeming poverty and lack of opportunity as the roots of the violence that rocked the city, the city's racialized resistance to "outsiders" superseded the city's obligations to care for its people. Coupling this situation with the impacts of the growing global neoliberal regime, the tensions surrounding a tumultuous and bleak job market in the wake of factory closings, and the city's growing (and now nearly insurmountable) problems with debt, the city's search for a culprit all too often lands on the most vulnerable and marginal in the city. As a result, ordinary people in Detroit have been saddled with decades of blame for multiscalar systems of violence, repression, and social inequality that has been largely outside of their control and it is the efforts of the MDTRC that are supposed to engage with these processes.

In this sense a Truth and Reconciliation Commission could be a ripe opportunity to develop a people-centric narrative of the city's decline, and could offer people-centric alternatives to the city's future. However, the challenges to progressive social change in Detroit are steep, especially in the legal and political conditions that mark the present. This also highlights a weakness of the United States TRC movement. Because they operate outside of official and government sanctioned bodies, they often lack the structural force of the state, or other supra-national organizations, to complete their work.

Unfortunately, the city's Emergency Manager and the move to Bankruptcy have placed the fate of the city, ironically enough, within the hands of "outsiders" once again: financiers. Today, it matters not to the city's leaders if Detroit provides for its people, evidenced by school closures, the elimination of utility services, and the city's willingness to sell municipal land from underneath the public's feet. Leaders instead operate on neoliberalism's market-centric assumptions: absolve and eliminate debts above other obligations. The role of a TRC could indict these policies, but a large question that remains is how such an indictment could have teeth. How do grassroots TRCs scale their findings up to making powerful change? Detroit's activist leaders are up against powerful political and legal edicts that make the way forward woefully unclear.

The activists organizing truth commissions in the United States are engaging with diverse and nuanced conditions and working to connect their local conditions with broader economic, political and cultural structures that legitimate exploitation. An activist in Detroit explains:

we have been abandoned [by those in charge] for so long at the grassroots level, so much money has flowed into non-profit corporations, but nothing on the

ground has changed. So what you have is this tremendous grassroots movement around urban [issues] where people have been creating whole new communities out of nothing. And those are strong, very strong. They are not going to go quietly into some night. And they're not easily going to give up, even if they shut neighborhoods, because we're more democratized here in the city than at any point in my memory [she has organized in the city for 40 years].

In each of the communities that are engaged in TRC processes, a unifying feature is that the local, regional and national government has essentially abandoned these communities. While each of these communities in the United States are addressing oppression, that oppression is operationalized differently. They are each engaged in a participant-driven effort aimed at harnessing creative energy in a process that transforms space and place. An activist in Greensboro, North Carolina who was central to organizing the Greensboro reconciliation process best sums up this sentiment when he testified before the Greensboro commission:

You never have to stir up any dissent and discord, because the dissent, the anger exists, it's everyday, it's part of the everyday life of people...but what an organizer tries to do is to help people, 1) understand better what it is that gives rise to the things, the conditions that they're angry about, and 2) to help them be in a position to collectively work on doing something to change it. So that's what we did in communities. And when you do that, people will call it agitation, because it is—because you're helping to stir things up, different from what is the status quo (Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006, p. 39).

Two significant points in particular emerge from this quote that informs our understandings of peace and justice within neoliberal modes of production. First, democratic movements in and of themselves are not inherently opposed to neoliberalism or capitalism or racism or patriarchy (Purcell, 2008). By connecting on the ground oppression in the United States with the broader movement for international justice vis-a-vi TRCs, organizers of United States TRC's are striving to do this by first giving people a better understanding of what gives rise to their conditions and second helping them to be in position to do something to change it. Second, as the state has weakened its efforts to equal out the social surplus and as wealth concentrates state actors have significantly strengthened the repressive tendencies of the state as it relates social control. However, this has also opened up significant spaces for everyday people to work to hold the state accountable. In other words the way oppression operates is important to understanding how resistance "takes place."

CONCLUSION:

As political geographers continue to refine and engage with the geographies of violence and peace, we argue for studies that begin with those individuals and grassroots groups who are working to reimagine and remake the world through actually existing justice movements. With this focus, academic debates about meanings of peace and violence can shift from the historic dichotomy of peace as simply the opposite of war (Kobayashi, 2009) to a more spatially grounded and politically nuanced reality--one that will have solidarity with oppressed peoples. In much the same way that Tyner, Inwood, and Alderman (2014) have sought to de-essentialize violence, we argue for understandings of peace abstracted from the messy, concrete realities of lived experience,

resistance, and peace-building. In other words, it is necessary to put academic work on peace into a broader and more specific conversation with those structures and systems that lead to differentiated life outcomes and unpeaceful conditions in the first place.

Central to this conversation is understanding the way peace, as a socio-spatial relation, is linked to and flows from understandings of violence, which also cannot be fetishized or given a naturalized, unquestioned existence (Tyner and Inwood 2014).

Within the United States over the last forty years, state/economy relations have changed with the neoliberal retreat from social welfare provision and so too have understandings of violence and the state's responsibility for addressing these wrongs and protecting citizens' rights. While on one hand these changes have made marginal lives even more precarious and vulnerable, it has also opened fresh terrain for social justice and community activists to reclaim their communities and articulate innovative strategies for achieving social justice. As illustrated in Greensboro and Detroit, the efforts of United States TRCs are examples of diverse communities crafting grassroots responses to unpeaceful conditions and, in the process, expanding our definitions of what peaceful societies might actually look like. This expands a largely academic debate about the theoretical definition of peace, to one that is grounded in the hard fought realities of struggle and survivability. We argue that the reality of struggle must become central to our understanding of peace and justice and should serve as our basis for our definitions of peace. This will create an understanding of peace that is practical and concrete and will open up myriad more contradictions that academics and activists can exploit to create the world we desperately seek, but which has yet to be realized.

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