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David Ragland
Pacifica Graduate Institute, davidjragland@gmail.com

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Truth-Telling as Decolonial Human Rights Education in the Movement for Black Liberation

David Ragland*
Pacifica Graduate Institute

Abstract

Despite the rise of the Western human rights regime in the years following WWII, Black communities suffered from continuous human rights abuses. The work of the Truth Telling Project during the Ferguson movement discovered flaws in Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) models when applied to Black liberation struggles in the United States. TRCs were situated as a human rights tool within international civil society to address the abuses of nation-states, corporations and individuals who committed crimes against humanity; however, the needs of the age in which we live in the United States require truth-telling that can reveal historical exclusions. Furthermore, the fields that teach about peace and human rights need to substantively challenge the narrative of human rights as they impact and exclude the experience of Black liberation struggles. This article contends that truth-telling is a practice rooted firmly in Black liberation struggles and critical race

* **David Ragland, PhD** is one of the co-founders and co-executive director of the [Truth Telling Project](#) and the director of the [Grassroots Reparations Campaign](#). In 2019, David was inducted into Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Collegium of Scholars at Morehouse College. David currently teaches in Ecopsychology, Depth Psychology and Community Liberation at Pacifica Graduate Institute. davidjragland@gmail.com

theory and that it is a decolonial practice that must inform the fields of peace education, human rights education and research areas that influence future iterations of truth processes. Truth-telling in this sense is a public pedagogy and a radical act toward liberation that must lead to reparations that address the historic harms against Black people and transform extractive relationships in the neoliberal configuration of human rights.

Introduction

Currently, we face an unprecedented moment shaped by a global pandemic, police violence, uprising and insurgencies, and extreme divisions in politics. There has long been silence about how the neoliberal economic system leaves out race from the mainstream discourse (Dawson & Francis, 2016), while reinforcing the economic, social and political inequalities within Western democracies. As a decolonial peace educator and critical race theory scholar-activist, one of the founders of the Truth Telling Project (TTP), and a member of the Ferguson Frontline, this offering speaks to the collective struggle to address structural violence which undergirds state sponsored police violence; while building local and national truth-telling processes as an expression of human dignity.

This article speaks to the public pedagogy of truth-telling in Black social movements that needs to inform our understanding of rights and dignity. While activists and their supporters and some academic circles were tuned into the ongoing structural violence epidemic (before Covid-19) in the United States and across the globe, most Americans did not have to or want to think about the struggles of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities. According to the BIPOC project, the term BIPOC is used to “highlight the unique relationship to whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color

within a U.S. context.”¹ As a scholar-activist, I situate my current research with the organizing around truth-telling as a decolonial process attuned to the human dignity of communities silenced by U.S. settler colonial and heteropatriarchal social, economic and political worldviews and values. This article first reviews the historical context of race and racialized violence in the United States, then critically analyses human rights frameworks as they have been engaged by Black Americans, and finally discusses the ongoing Black freedom struggle and the role of truth-telling, presenting the work of the Truth-Telling Project (TTP) that emerged out of Ferguson, Missouri, during the uprisings after the police killing of unarmed teenaged Michael Brown in 2014.

Historical and Social Contexts

During the coronavirus pandemic, many in the United States mainstream first discovered the staggering health and economic disparities and disproportionate rates of police violence perpetrated by law enforcement against Black Americans. Given the increased attention to issues of racial injustice, never before has there been such a level of approval and support for racial justice and anti-police violence activism around the United States and the world. Yet, the disparities still abound. ProPublica recently described the rate at which Black men are dying from Covid-19 as “hollowing out” a population already beset with incarceration and other social ills.² In April 2020, the *Washington Post* reported the death

¹ See more at <https://www.thebipocproject.org/>

² ProPublica report on the impact of the corona virus on Black men <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-covid-19-hollowed-out-a-generation-of-young-black-men>

rate of Black people was *six times* higher than White³ people in majority communities.⁴ To date, the mortality of Black people from the coronavirus has not improved. At the start of the pandemic, Black people received 81 percent of the New York Police Department's summons for not social distancing.⁵ In 2020 alone, there were 1,066 people killed by police. Even though Black people are only 13 percent of the U.S. population, 28 percent of those murdered by police were Black.⁶

The reality of racialized and structural violence against Black people by law enforcement and the disproportionate impact of coronavirus can be traced to the history of slave patrols as the historical predecessor of modern police forces. Likewise, medical apartheid is part of the heteropatriarchal power of the U.S. medical industrial complex benefiting from and maintaining remnants from experimentation on enslaved Black people. The current state of medical apartheid can be traced to the period of U.S. history when enslaved Black women, men and children were experimented upon, without personal benefit or consent and to the detriment of their

³ *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.*

⁴ April 2020 Washington Post article <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/?arc404=true>

⁵ Newsweek report on NYC social distance summons <https://www.newsweek.com/81-percent-nypds-social-distancing-summons-were-issued-blacks-latinos-its-new-stop-frisk-1502841?>

⁶ For more, see <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>

mental and physical health, for the sake of “scientific advancement.” There has been recent attention to the tortuous experiments of Dr. J. Sims, the father of modern gynecology (Domonoski, 2018; Wall, 2016) on enslaved Black women. Risë Kevalshar Collins (2020) tells stories passed down to her about slave patrols and hers and other Black women’s experience with substandard medical treatment or as experiments.⁷ These and countless other violations of human rights against Black, Indigenous and other People of Color—whose immense intergenerational trauma and contributions to the United States—are continuously silenced in the retelling of American history, and often also in the academic fields of peace studies, peace education, and human rights. We only know about much of this history because of those who pass down their stories and the stories of their families and friends.

The historical moment when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was established lacked authenticity, given the document’s credibility and representational problem (Al Daraweesh, 2020) since many of the European countries still held colonies. Even the United States, which led much of the establishment of the universal principles and standards of conduct of human rights, was engaged in various rights abuses at the time such as through government-funded experiments on Black people in Tuskegee, Alabama. Little attention has been given to the need for accountability for ongoing and past atrocities committed by the United States and European signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The racist and imperialist power relations continued even after Western liberal democracies adopted the UDHR and with the rise of the “global human rights regime,” making the post-WWII grand narrative mostly window dressing (Maldonado-Torres, 2008).

⁷ Risë Kevalshar Collins discusses American Apartheid and Decolonization https://www.idahopress.com/boiseweekly/opinion/guest_opinions/challenging-american-apartheid-championing-american-decolonization-with-love-and-more/article_a026c339-8373-54de-8787-981be1aed98d.html

The narrative-building project of the United States silences truth, preventing the masses from hearing truth-telling from the margins. Missing from the WWII narrative is how the Nazis studied the United States—the theft of Indigenous land, the Jim Crow codes, and other forms of oppression and violence enacted against non-White people—in order to learn how they might enshrine racial codes and extremist views into the legal system (Little, 2019; Miller, 2019; Puckett, 2011). We continue to live with the colonial practices of sterilization of Latinx and Black immigrants in custody in the United States by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Historical accounts leave out the role that U.S. scientists played in the eugenics movement as a way to advance “racial purity” (Gross, 2019). This history points out that while the United States highlighted the insidious abuses of Germany and its allies against Jews and those deemed unworthy of human rights, the United States is forgetful of its own systemic violations and those against non-White humans throughout the world.

To some extent, Europe was forced to grapple with anti-Semitism because of the Nuremberg Tribunal, but the United States as the newly emerging leader of the West did not address its own human rights abuses. And colonial violence has not been reckoned with; there is silence regarding the German genocide of Namibians and Italy’s use of chemical weapons against Ethiopia despite the League of Nations treaty outlawing their use. These, and many other crimes against humanity, go without serious consideration of reparations for slavery and colonization, despite examples such as the United States having paid reparations to Japanese Americans for their internment in the United States during World War II.

Truth-telling can reveal historical exclusions, and the fields of peace and human rights education need to more actively engage truth-telling particularly vis-à-vis Black experiences and liberation struggles. Mahdis Azarmandi (2016) writes in terms of peace studies that the “decolonial critique and engagement with continuities of colonialism and racism in the global North have been marginal... [R]ace as [an] analytic concept is largely absent in peace studies theorizing” (p. 70). This absence contributes to the systemic blindness in fields like peace studies, peace education, and human rights education in addressing various forms of systemic and enduring

colonial violence. As a faculty member in a peace studies department, I have witnessed the relocation of violence in developing nations and communities of color without acknowledging its origin in the West. Inside and outside of the classroom, I try to shift these dynamics, but the absence of critical race perspectives across various levels of the academy ensures little substantive attention will be given to disrupting the continuing harm of coloniality and racial violence. Mahdis Azarmandi (2018) argues that in this context, scholarship is disconnected by identity and place, from an often disinterested academic location and context, thus framing inquiry into global conflict as outside of the “civilized world,” perpetuating similar violence within the field and externally given its impact on policy and practice.

The Black Freedom Struggle: 1940s to Ferguson

In the period immediately following World War II, while the nation was engaged in peacebuilding in a war-torn Europe, Black people in the United States continued to endure the violence of lynchings primarily in the Jim Crow South, and police violence and brutality throughout the country (Alexander, 2012; Blackmon, 2008). Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor (2016) describes how the war “unleashed upheaval among the colonial possessions of the old world order. As the colonized world went into revolt against European powers, the superpowers made appeals to the newly emerging independent countries. This made discrimination against Blacks not only a domestic issue but also an international one” (p. 32). After World War II, Black migration increased as many escaped the racial terror of the Jim Crow South (Taylor, 2016), and Black veterans also returned home to such violence. The Equal Justice Initiative has highlighted the history of lynching in the United States in describing a series of incidents immediately after World War II:

Black veterans of World War II also faced violence for the most basic assertions of equality and freedom. In August 1944, the white owner of a small restaurant in Shreveport, Louisiana, shot and wounded four Black soldiers he claimed ‘attempted to take over his place.’ He faced no charges. In June 1947, a Black Navy veteran named Joe

Nathan Roberts, studying at Temple University through the G.I. Bill, was visiting family in Sardis, Georgia, when a group of white men became upset because he refused to call them “sir.” Later that night, the men abducted Mr. Roberts from his parents’ home and shot him to death. The next year, on September 9, 1948, a group of white men shot and killed a 28-year-old Black veteran named Isaiah Nixon outside of his home and in front of his wife and six children, just hours after he defied threats and voted in the local primary election in Montgomery County, Georgia. Two white men arrested and charged with his death were later acquitted by all-white juries.⁸

Black soldiers who fought valiantly in the World Wars returned home expecting a bare minimum of decent treatment, yet returned to housing and job shortages and experienced harsher treatment from White people in the United States than they had abroad. Often, Black veterans were accused of attempting to rise above their social station, impersonating soldiers or threatening Whites, which was the justification for brutal retaliation. African Americans wrongly believed that their participation in the war efforts would reduce anti-Black sentiments and violence.⁹ This speaks to the reality that the only times the United States was willing to include Black people (Black men) in the moral community was to wield violence against the *other* outside of its borders.

⁸ The Equal Justice Initiative documents Lynching throughout the US south between 1877 and 1950. <https://eji.org/news/remembering-black-veterans-and-racial-terror-lynchings/>

⁹ Professor Chad Williams examines W.E.B. Du Bois’ changing views about Black participation in the world wars <https://www.aaihs.org/w-e-b-du-bois-world-war-i-and-the-question-of-failure/>; W.E.B. Du Bois’ statement on World War II offers a critique of Western Imperialism as the root cause and reason for the West to end colonialism Dubious’ statement on WWII: <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-b095-i314/#page/1/mode/iup>; Bayard Rustin was a conscientious objector on the basis of his religion and the contradiction of fighting fascism in Europe while facing segregation in the United States; Letter submitted to Rustin’s draft board: <https://www.afsc.org/blogs/acting-in-faith/i-must-resist-bayard-rustin-s-letter-to-draft-board>

Black veterans were not the only ones targeted by racial violence, and that violence took many forms. According to Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor (2016), given the housing shortage, when Black Americans attempted to integrate into White areas, they were set upon by White mobs. Taylor (2016) writes: “In both the North and the South, white police either joined the attacks on African Americans or, as they had done so many times before, passively stood aside as whites stoned houses, set fires, destroyed cars, smashed windows and threaten to kill and Blacks who got in their way” (p. 33). The Queer, Black, anti-war and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin was imprisoned for conscientious objection to World War II. His objections were on moral grounds related to his Quaker spiritual commitments to peace. Rustin argued about the contradictions of fighting against fascism in Europe while struggling against Jim Crow segregation in the United States. The language describing the great “wars” spoke to concepts like peace and human rights, and propositions like ending colonialism and fighting fascism, while Black folks struggled against the relentless violation of our dignity and rights as we battled southern terrorism and violent northern White mobs in the periods before, during, and after WWI and WWII.

The result of truth-seeking through documentation of racialized, ethnic, or political violence can uncover stories that might lead to the telling of truthful histories that inform racial healing and *truth* processes resulting in justice for impacted communities. Margaret Burnham (2020) at Northeastern University Law School, who leads the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Center, connects the continuous waves of anti-Black violence from the 1930s through the 1970s in their truth seeking efforts to investigate and litigate civil and human rights violations. Professor Burnham’s description of the racial terrorism against Black folks during this period is important as she engages in the practice of truth-telling around systematic human rights abuses.

While the grand narrative of democracy and human rights has permeated U.S. foreign policy, the United States has failed to apply human rights internally or recognize the human dignity of Black (and BIPOC communities). The United States continues to practice targeted economic

exclusion, brutal policing, mass incarceration, and has general failed to apply equal protection to non-White citizens. The radical truth-telling of El Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (Malcolm X) rebuked the American Dream grand narrative by highlighting the ongoing silencing and dehumanizing abuse against BIPOC communities in the United States and their linkages with colonized peoples of the world. Charles Nier III (1997) writes that:

Malcolm X's political viewpoints were dominated by two themes: a developing Pan-African perspective centered upon his efforts to establish a relationship between African-Americans and Africans as a liberating pedagogy and his efforts to utilize this relationship as a means to elevate the black liberation struggle within the United States from the civil rights level to the international human rights level. (p. 153)

The attempt to hold the United States accountable on the world stage for its rights abuses, coupled with Malcolm's deepening pan-Africanist worldview, situated the Black liberation struggle in the United States as global and connected with freedom efforts on the African continent and in diasporic communities throughout the Western hemisphere. At an Organization for Afro American Unity Rally on July 5, 1964, Malcolm X spoke on the need for an international approach given the absence of human rights protections for Black folks: "[y]ou and I have to make it a world problem, make the world aware that there'll be no peace on this earth as long as our human rights are being violated in America. Then the world will have to step in and try and see that our human rights are respected and recognized" (Neir, 1997, p. 157). Over the next few months Malcolm X pushed African heads of state to endorse a call for the U.N. Human Rights Council to investigate the United States in its failure to protect Black people from human rights abuses often sanctioned by the U.S. government.

Because of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights bill, the statement about U.S. human rights violations was downgraded to a "carefully-worded" statement to address these concerns (Neir, 1997, 158-159). While Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was influenced by international human rights thinking and his rhetoric situated the freedom movement of the 1960s in international human rights language, the policies that resulted from that

activism and organizing did not reflect the human rights framework (Richardson, 2007, 471-473). Despite the limitations of the human rights framework, the Black freedom movement sought to use the international arena to address human rights violations perpetrated by the United States against Black people. The end result was the liberal implementation of Civil Rights era legislation that—much like the period of decolonization only shifted the perception of colonial violence against developing nations—lessened the perception of American racism. The Civil Rights Movement attempted to paint the United States as having ended a brutally racist past, despite many lingering inequalities and injustices.

Derrick Bell (1987), founding scholar of Critical Race Theory, argues that the passage and content of Civil Rights legislation is hollow because it aligned with the interests of White liberal elites' concern with the United States' image abroad and tried to prevent more radical ideologies from gaining momentum. Civil Rights legislation was not concerned with Black liberation in the form of political autonomy and economic empowerment; it sought only to reform the U.S.' reputation. Malcolm X famously described integration under Civil Rights as Novocain - a temporary easing of the pain while continuing the violence. The commitment and participation of Malcolm X and other figures like Maya Angelou and W.E.B. Du Bois in human rights organizing within an internationalist, pan-Africanist framework deepened Black social movements and communities in the U.S.' connection to global Black (and leftist) struggles for liberation and human dignity (Angelou, 1986). The connection to pan-Africanist ideologies and struggles helped to frame the emerging political claims and moral imagination of the Black Power and subsequent Black Lives Matter movements, including feminist, queer, and leftist organizing that shape current activism.

The global liberation movements, rooted in pan-Africanist ideologies, that ended direct colonialism and apartheid influenced the Black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s and laid the foundation for the activism in the Ferguson Uprising (Murch, 2015; Taylor, 2016), as well as those in this current moment.

The Ferguson Uprising, Black Lives Matter and Truth-Telling

*Colonialism lies to us all in countless ways; in such a context, truth telling is both powerful and necessary.*¹⁰

Much like Selma did in its time, the Ferguson uprising in our time has revealed to the United States some of the most vile parts of itself. The Ferguson uprising, inspired by the freedom and liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, was an unapologetic offering to a continuum of movements by speaking out and standing against the heteropatriarchal, capitalist systems that sanction police violence and profit from the murder, incarceration, global imperialism, and economic apartheid of BIPOC communities. After the murder of Mike Brown on August 9, 2014, peaceful protests over the course of weeks were met with excessive and militarized force by police, clamping down not only on the expressions of free speech by activists, but also on journalists reporting on the protests.¹¹ The protests gained renewed momentum after officer Darren Wilson was acquitted of all charges in the murder of Brown, an unarmed 18-year old. Historian Donna Murch (2015) has written the following about Ferguson:

I have no words to express what is happening in Ferguson. In the name of Michael Brown, a beautiful Black storm against state violence is brewing so dense it has created a gravity of its own, drawing in people from all over the U.S., from centers of wealth and privilege to this city whose most prosperous years were a century ago... It looks explicitly not only to St. Louis City and County police and other municipal law enforcement, but also to the imperial wars

¹⁰ Truth-Telling and Decolonization Report by The Simon Fraser Public Interest Research Group (SFPIRG) is Simon Fraser University's student-funded and student-directed resource center dedicated to social and environmental justice: <https://sfpirg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/SFPIRG-Truth-Telling-Zine.pdf>

¹¹ For more on the arrest of journalists during the Ferguson protests, see here: <https://qz.com/1897852/what-reparations-mean-for-companies/>

in the Middle East as sites of murder and trauma. The call repeated over and over is Stokely Carmichael's: "Organize, Organize, Organize." And this growing youth movement has all the ancestral sweetness of kinship.¹²

In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016), Angela Davis, speaking about the impact of Ferguson, writes:

Ferguson reminds us that we have to globalize our thinking about these issues... When Mike Brown was killed almost a year ago, Ferguson activists proclaimed that they were standing up not only for this young man whose life was needlessly sacrificed, but also for the countless others. If it had not been for Ferguson, we might not have been compelled to focus our attention on Eric Garner in New York and eleven-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland and Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina and Freddie Gray in Baltimore. If it had not been for Ferguson, we might not have remembered Miriam Carey in Washington, DC, Rekia Boyd in Chicago and Aleia Thomas in Los Angeles. Had it not been for Ferguson protestors, who also pointed out that Black women and people of color and queer communities and Palestinian activists were targets of officially condoned racist violence, we might not have achieved such a broad consciousness of the work that will be required to build a better world. (pp. 27, 97-98)

The Ferguson protest movement exposed the ways that militarized policing turned the city's streets into battle zones, betraying the very people whose taxes and disproportionately levied fees from traffic, ordinance and criminal violations maintained the salaries of police and kept municipalities like Ferguson from crumbling from disinvestment because of White flight (Rios, 2019). The response by local activists to Mike Brown Jr.'s murder rippled

¹² Murch, D. (2015) Ferguson's Inheritance
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/ferguson-police-black-lives-matter/>

across the United States, seeding the ground for the current movement (Rios, 2019) that was built and is now responding to the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many others.

The radical truth-telling of the Ferguson uprising is a global and public pedagogy that gave life and form to the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. After teaching a summer introduction to a course on education for peace and social justice at Bucknell University in 2014, I went home to St. Louis to visit my family. August 9th is both my mother's and nephew's birthday. My family and I learned of Mike Brown Jr.'s murder, but numbness prevented me from acting in the moment. It wasn't until sharing with a friend that I recently took students to observe a protest outside of the Israeli embassy over the recent incursion/attack on Gaza that I made the decision to go to the protest. My friend told me, "We have our own Gaza here." I was shaken from the numbness that I felt I needed to adopt in order to move through White academic spaces as one of the few Black male faculty members.

The lived experience and the practice of truth-telling has not just been about the Ferguson protest movement, but also about redressing trauma visited upon those who speak up about the contradictions in the field and in their everyday experience. As a young peace, education, and conflict scholar, I experienced various forms of racism from those charged with practicing and teaching nonviolence, peace education, human rights education, restorative justice (RJ), and related work in international and domestic U.S. settings. I witnessed the way White people are centered at every turn in the scholarship. Deference to foundational concepts of peace education and peace studies are centered around Galtung's conceptions of negative and positive peace; his theorizing of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) kept the discourse mostly theoretical and distanced itself from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s earlier explanations of these same concepts but that were rooted in social movements (Ragland, 2014).¹³ This analysis aids in the

¹³ For example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s statements precede Galtung's theorizing but resonate deeply with these now-core concepts of the fields of peace studies and peace

maintenance of a division between the scholarship and practice of peace, keeping the content of injustices experienced by impacted communities and racial justice organizing outside of academic realms.

When, by chance, I became a part of the Ferguson uprising, the radical truth-telling I witnessed freed me. As a Black man from the Ferguson/St. Louis community, I had been pressured to minimize myself as a way to survive and flourish. Toward the end of my graduate studies, I came across a racist National Rifle Association (NRA) recruiting advertisement, encouraging students to shoot at Black people, chalked on the university sidewalk. When I brought this issue up to my advisors, I was told to keep quiet about it and finish my work. In order to keep my first post-Ph.D. teaching position, I was told to cut my dreadlocks by a trusted mentor. After doing so, I remember colleagues in my office speaking to me for the first time, as if I had only just started. There is much more to say about my everyday experience as an academic, but in these cases my colleagues were charged with teaching pre-service teachers about social justice and diversity, yet their practices inside and outside of the classroom did not reflect those values. My participation in the Ferguson uprising taught me more about decolonial and principled struggle than any of my studies or attendance at academic conferences because of the way Black people impacted by law enforcement challenged the validity of the American institutions that sanction our murder.

The Ferguson uprising was a catalyst, providing the playbook for activism to articulate what the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (BLM)

education: (1) "It is not enough to say 'We must not wage war.' It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but the positive affirmation of peace" (Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Anti-War Conference, Los Angeles, California, February 25, 1967); (2) "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice" (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 1958). Retrieved from: <https://www.nps.gov/mlkm/learn/quotations.htm>

encapsulated in this political moment. Alicia Garza (2014) elaborates on the term when she states,

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.¹⁴

BLM is a global moral claim that challenges anti-Blackness throughout the world and posits value and worth as inherent in all Black lives. Garza (2014) continues

Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements... When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement [of] Black poverty and [that] genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that one million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgment that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence.¹⁵

The energy from the Ferguson protests combined with the BLM ideology challenged the lessons many of our parents taught us around

¹⁴ For more, see <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>

¹⁵ For more, see <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

respectability. For example, President Barack Obama¹⁶ suggested that part of the issue with Black achievement could be boiled down to ‘pulling up your pants.’ Similar advice includes the ‘talk’ Black parents give to their children to be safe from the police and employing “code switching’ in order to survive a police encounter or get a desired job. The idea that acting respectable provides safety against discrimination and violence is reflexive in that it plays on the neoliberal idea that opportunities and rights are provided for those who accept them and if they are not, people and their impacted communities are at fault (Ragland, 2018, p. 522). Throwing off the constraints of respectability politics went beyond letting my hair grow out or adding strategically placed curse words in the talks I gave about Ferguson. The uprising gave me permission to engage in unapologetic truth-telling about the stark realities as a way of exposing the injustices and intergenerational trauma of Black communities and my lived experience.

Over the course of a few months of participating in the protests following Michael Brown Jr.’s brutal murder by a Ferguson Police officer, and sharing what was happening back to my campus where I taught, I helped to start the Truth Telling Project (TTP) with other activists and members from the community. TTP was initially concerned with the creation of a South African-styled Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). We held a convening in March 2015, inviting our local community and practitioners and scholars doing related research from around the nation. During the convening, the “overwhelming principle that was agreed upon... was that the specifics of any truth-telling process should not be imposed by outside experts and organizers. Rather, the goal is to hear the

¹⁶ T. Coates on Obama and Obama Administration Respectability Politics: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/05/how-the-obama-administration-talks-to-black-america/276015/>

actual voices of the community and to draw the agenda from that.”¹⁷ While truth-telling comes with its critiques, we engaged in truth-telling outside of the official framework of establishing a TRC and transitional justice thinking, taking note of what made sense, and leaving out what was not supportive.

Truth-telling in the Ferguson uprising was an unapologetic and urgent communiqué, declaring and demanding that Black lives be valued in an anti-Black world. Truth-telling is the baring of the soul to demand urgent attention to our human dignity. Truth-telling is a decolonial practice that involves the reclaiming of lost narratives, the airing of grievances, the resisting of and challenge to a colonized narrative that denies the inherent value and dignity of Black lives (Ragland, 2018; Romano & Ragland, 2018). Fuad Al-Daraweesh (2020) writes that “[t]he concept of human dignity encapsulates different views of the worth of humans. It is employed to elevate the level of a human’s worth to a higher level of worth conducive to flourishing and consistent with justice, rights, and peace” (p. 7). Truth-telling has always been a way for BIPOC communities to speak to the violations of their human dignity and rights. In my view, the Ferguson uprising, the organizing of the many truth commissions, activism around the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #ExpectUS, #ReparationsNow, #SayHerName, #BlackTransLivesMatter and #WeKeepUsSafe (and so many other hashtags), are all forms of truth-telling that demand multidirectional rights, or rights and obligations. The multidirectional view involves the idea of the pluriverse of rights (Williams & Bermeo, 2020) and moral demands that speak to governments at all levels, as well as for-profit corporations and nonprofit institutions, and White America more broadly. Obligations include the self-determination of impacted communities to dream and make decisions that benefit the entire community. The truth-telling of the Ferguson uprising lifted the veil on the willingness of the U.S. government

¹⁷ Truth Telling Weekend Convening Report, June 2015.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB3mAKx-HiHiEeDBXcjVaaopJaiE/view?usp=sharing>

to turn its violence on its own citizens, not as a new phenomenon, but part of an ongoing project of maintaining the order among America's non-White populations. Having that reality exposed by the impacted populations considered most subhuman in the United States was socially and politically unhooking for White folks and, as a result, a radical act.

Truth-telling is a public pedagogy that holds a light to socially sanctioned and produced ignorance; and in the United States, truth-telling animates this nation's moral imagination and memory. Imani Scott (2015) argues that truth-telling is the beginning of a necessary "moral inventory" and is the first step for any society interested in facing the harm it has caused. To break the silence and dismantle socially sanctioned ignorance, Ferguson activists' various forms of protest educated and revealed the roots of the deeper, more subtle institutional racism and corporate plutocracy. For example, during the Ferguson October, which was a week of protests to mobilize national support toward the indictment of Mike Brown Jr.'s killer, activists staged creative protests at different places, like the symphony, while hanging signs and singing "Justice for Mike Brown is Justice for us all."



One of the attendees of that night's event had a look of utter shock at seeing the performance disrupted. One of the aims of the protests throughout the Ferguson uprising was to disrupt the complacency and self-righteous belief in "White goodness" that many White liberals held and still hold (Sullivan, 2014). This disruption was

especially poignant at places like the symphony orchestra, which represent “high culture.” The protest illustrated that there is no goodness in any parts of a culture that allows state-sanctioned violence. The movement used art to illustrate and disrupt other sacred and seemingly non-political spaces like malls and retail stores throughout the region. This and many other acts of truth-telling taught the world about the violence Black folks have been experiencing since we were brought to these shores over 400 years ago.

Truth-telling is also a victim/survivor-centered process that can be informal or formal, and connected or disconnected to an ongoing transitional or restorative justice process such as a TRC. Truth-telling, while part of a moral inventory, has also served as a way to publicly share and sometimes dramatize stories directly from those who have been most impacted. Truth-telling is especially important given the failure of legal systems to uphold laws meant to protect Black communities. The importance of the truth in the United States matters deeply because of the permanent enshrinement of spaces for subtle and outright discrimination in legal codes, policy and social norms as seen in the ongoing silence around the history of U.S. slavery and colonization. Formal truth-telling processes that give voice to victims and survivors of racialized violence as it did in South Africa offer the possibility for widespread impact and political realignment given the depth of trauma it uncovers.

The young people of Ferguson led the charge of telling the truth of what happened as the nation watched, and others from across the country went to Ferguson, just as they went to Mississippi in 1964 during Freedom Summer. The Story of Michael Brown Jr. exemplifies how we must tell the truth in order for the possibilities of healing to unfold. (DeWolf & Geddes, 2019, p. 81)

The Truth Telling Project

The most famous truth and reconciliation process was initiated to address the gross violations against Black South Africans’ human rights during the apartheid period (1948-1990s). Since that time, communities around the world have used truth and reconciliation commissions to

address mass atrocities and various forms of harm for healing of intergenerational trauma as well as telling stories to provide truthful narratives. In the United States, the Greensboro TRC and the Maine TRC are examples of uncovering the truth and impact of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre and the widespread use of boarding schools to forcibly remove Indigenous youth from their families (from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries) (Davis, 2018). TRCs and truth commissions are tools within the Western liberal democracy and its human rights regime that reflect the very society they are attempting to “transition” and “restore.” While many TRCs and truth commissions around the world reveal the traumatic experiences hidden by official accounts, they are limited by the reliance on the nation state and public officials for validation. While the overall importance of the South African TRC cannot be overstated, we learned important lessons from some of the shortcomings, such as focusing on selected specific offenders; equating the harm of the African National Congress with the apartheid regime; and the failure to pay reparations to the victims of the apartheid regime; and failing to support those who told their stories publicly, thus, retraumatizing the truth-tellers (Davis, 2018, p. 71). Despite the transformative and healing impact for some,¹⁸ reparations to address the impact of violent and traumatic experiences on victims of these gross human rights abuses are often small or excluded in favor of measures that focus solely on symbolism and healing processes.¹⁹

The Truth Telling Project of Ferguson (TTP) emerged as a community initiative and educational intervention rooted in restorative and

¹⁸ United Nations Development Program 2010, Report on Reparations, Gender and Development, retrieved from <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/Kampala%20workshop%202011-%20Reparations,%20Development%20and%20Gender.pdf>

¹⁹ There were small payments to a small number of victims in South Africa, Governor Paul Le Page was happy to endorse the Maine Boarding School TRC but spoke publicly about not wanting to consider reparations: <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/dawnland/>

transformative justice to challenge narratives that justify harm leveled against Black folk, while building community efficacy and supporting the protest movement through the telling of stories that reflect the experience of those most victimized by direct and structural violence. Storytelling in critical race theory is used to provide deeper and personal connections within a legal framework to illustrate issues of equity and justice (Tate, 1997, pp. 217-218). Critical race theory (CRT) employs stories and counterstories that present the realities and experience of BIPOC communities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; Writer, 2008). At the same time, CRT is a “mechanism to perform truth-telling—to speak back to colonization and oppression” (Writer, 2008, p. 3). As much as truth-telling is in service of uncovering the lingering colonial violence in law enforcement and the institutions that support it, truth-telling speaks the mundane into the sacred, honoring the lived experience of people who are not valued by mainstream society.

The Ferguson activists and community members involved in the “Truth Telling Weekend,” a convening dedicated to truth-telling as anti-racist praxis, decided that we would focus primarily on truth-telling, not because there wasn’t an interest in reconciliation, but because the concept was perceived as focusing on forgiveness and reconciliation with police and their supporters who believed murdering Black people was not wrong. Community members argued that forgiveness without reckoning with history or taking any actions toward justice was misguided. For example, in the case of Black people killed by police, there were no members of law enforcement willing to characterize their violence as wrong. In addition, the police brutality experienced by activists and the impact of witnessing the onslaught of police violence against Black people throughout the United States were deeply traumatizing. As a result, those community members who attended the weekend were unwilling to participate in a process that gave equal treatment, given the asymmetries of power, to official statements by law enforcement which ultimately invalidated the experience of people victimized by police.

After the Truth Telling Weekend, I began to encounter criticism from some peace, human rights education, and TRC scholars and

practitioners who were unable to see how the project fit into the peace movement because of this focus on truth-telling without forgiveness or reconciliation. At the 2015 International Institute on Peace Education held in Toledo, Ohio, fellow activists Imani Scott, Cori Bush and I gave a panel presentation about the Truth Telling Project. The questioning from the audience was focused on why we did not focus on forgiveness and reconciliation. According to Tom DeWolf and Jodie Geddes (2018) “the process of truth-telling in a safe space is the first step toward breaking free. It is important to note that the burden of forgiveness and reconciliation is not the primary responsibility of the oppressed and marginalized” (p. 82). We responded that while we may individually forgive for our own personal reasons, forgiveness for the Black community in the United States is political. We argued that the religious background and history of Black people in the Civil Rights Movement is misunderstood. The nonviolence and images of bloodied activists refusing to fight back, along with forgiveness in the case of Dylan Roof after he murdered the nine Black church-goers in Charleston, South Carolina, present a misleading view that every act of violence against Black people should be forgiven. Forgiveness, let alone basic decency, is rarely exercised when Black people in the United States encounter the criminal justice system. For us, forgiveness and reconciliation would be possible after the United States listens and learns from truth-telling by beginning the moral and material repair for slavery and the world it created.

After the Institute, we drove to St. Louis for the one-year anniversary of Michael Brown Jr.’s murder. While in St. Louis, I met with a TRC academic who wanted me to make introductions to Ferguson activists. As we met, I shared concerns I had with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects documents. After being welcomed to share my suggestions, I suggested that the activists be made co-authors if they were not paid for their time. The response was that I did not understand IRBs. Reports came back that the academic I met with shared that Ferguson did not understand TRCs and had put together a misguided project. Despite the criticism, we created a process rooted in community leadership that was validated by community members, organizers, and

noted leaders like Cori Bush, Mama Cat aka Cathy Daniels, Kristine Hendrix, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Drs. Angela and Fania Davis, Dr. Bernard Lafayette, Brandon Anderson, Rev. Nelson, and Joyce Johnson, and so many others.

With validation and consultation from the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,²⁰ TTP created a mandate and declaration of intent²¹ to hear testimony through 2016 that would be shared widely to document U.S. state-sanctioned violence and amplify the experiences of marginalized communities. Rather than creating a formal commission endorsed by the local, state, or national government, we—along with trusted Black and BIPOC leaders—validated ourselves as a decolonial act of self-definition and acknowledgement of the specificity of human dignity in the moral claim “Black Lives Matter.” TTP emerged as a bottom-up project to center our community members who had been made vulnerable because of their encounters with police. We chose not to go the formal route because of the following reasons: (1) most TRCs are nation-state sponsored, with interests that are primarily state-centered; (2) because of the current conditions, distrust of the state was high due to perceived government complicity in the repression at local levels; (3) the impact of the Ferguson uprising saw the creation of many commissions that to date have not resulted in any structural transformation; and (4) transitional justice suggests that there is a formal end of conflict, but police violence is ongoing, and trauma, distrust and resentment continue to resurface among impacted people from marginalized communities in the United States.

²⁰ For more, see <http://www.greensborotrc.org/>

²¹ Truth Telling Project Mandate
https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB1RkIXhZFao_NkiIengtTmhSRXM/view
& Declaration of Intent
https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB1RkIXhZFao_Y29oVldBWkN5SXM/view?usp=drivesdk

In November 2015, after learning from the leaders of the Greensboro Truth Commission and practitioners who worked on the Peruvian and South African TRC, we launched the Ferguson Truth Initiative or Truth Telling Hearings. The initiative held hearings in Ferguson and invited persons from around the country to share their stories in a ceremony and by creating a sacred space. The hearings were structured with truth-tellers who had experienced police brutality or had family members or close friends and/or partners who had been killed by police. The witnesses to the truth were respected local and national community members and restorative and transitional justice practitioners seated on the stage next to them. During each testimony, truth-tellers would share about their lived experience, the interactions with police and the impact of those encounters. While relatives of Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland and Mike Brown Jr. told their stories, we also heard from relatives of Cary Ball Jr. who was murdered by the St. Louis Police Department. Cary's mother Toni Taylor admitted that he was not perfect—he had a record and carried a gun for protection—but that “Cary deserved to live.”²² Highlighting the imperfection of victims was to reinforce the value of all Black lives.

At the end of the first day of hearings, we stood in a circle and chanted Assata Shakur's pledge: “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love and protect one another. We have nothing to lose but our chains.” Dr. Fania Davis, founder of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, stood next to me and said to me, “This is healing” (personal communication, November 2015). We created ceremony by honoring the people and stories shared in truth-telling hearings and deeming them as worthy of our attention; we renewed our calls for justice in the larger system and the need to influence policy.

²² Mark Lance writes about the Truth Telling Initiative. See Toni Taylor's testimony at: <https://medium.com/@thetruthtellingproject/listening-and-understanding-in-racist-america-3c814101a140>

Colonial structures deny the personhood of non-White people and truth-telling challenges that narrative. Arthur Romano and I write elsewhere that:

The processes that marginal communities create to heal and support each other are often overlooked or unrecognizable to those who have not experienced similar trauma and lived in such a community. Grassroots approaches to truth-telling are not outside the problematic dynamics that critics of TRCs raise; however, they offer an alternative approach in need of further exploration and more rigorous critical reflection moving forward. (p. 167)

Within our conceptualization of the truth-telling process, we accepted that “truth-telling” alone is incomplete and only a beginning. Yet, we understood the significance of valuing our own stories because they often shed needed light on a world that does not value truth.

The truth-telling hearings began in November of 2015 in Ferguson, Missouri. Over 30 participants shared their experiences of police violence, what they believed to be its underlying causes, and what change they wanted to see. TTP sponsored local discussion groups and forums with national activists, academics, artists, and advocates to further the notion of truth-telling as the first and most important step in any truth and reconciliation process. TTP organizers developed educational materials and borrowed dialogue frameworks from the Greensboro TRC’s “Night of a Thousand Conversations”²³ guide to support groups in other locales in understanding the tensions and commitments embedded in this emerging approach to truth-telling. These materials were informed by the truth-

²³ TTP Night of A Thousand Conversations Guide and FAQ to support community dialogue after watching testimony of those victimized by police violence a. Conversation Guide https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB1RkIXhZFao_UktIToNmZGIPSTg/view?usp=sharing; b. FAQ for facilitators https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB1RkIXhZFao_LWhjZo5TTUFZTEo/view?usp=sharing

telling hearings and forums. Tom DeWolf and Jodie Geddes (2018), summed up the first hearings and subsequent conversations:

In 2015, The Truth Telling Project hosted a national event entitled “A Night of a Thousand Conversations.” The truth-telling live stream of individuals sharing experiences of police terrorism and harm was viewed all across the country. Viewers were encouraged to have their own conversation afterwards, using a project toolkit. This was a bottom-up approach that started from the roots, with the people. The outcome of such truth-telling efforts is unpredictable. They may or may not result in apologies, forgiveness, or reconciliation. These may be the hoped-for goals for many participants, but as David Ragland, Cori Bush and Melinda Salazar, members of the Truth Telling Project Steering Committee, suggest: “reconciliation and forgiveness is not always possible in the wake of ongoing trauma. Many transitional justice, healing and trauma specialists understand the detrimental effects of forcing people to forgive their assailant.” (p. 82)

In addition to the hearings, community conversations, and a host of connected events sponsored by the Truth Telling project, one primary concern continues to focus on the importance of truth. By giving attention to Black folk who were victimized by police violence, TTP attempts to uplift the narratives of communities whose story is often not believed; often it is assumed that narratives are only credible when validated by White-dominated institutions.²⁴ Given the small staff and budget of TTP, as a way to further disseminate the testimonies in Ferguson, we created an online learning platform, entitled “It’s Time To Listen,”²⁵ to host the testimony and

²⁴For more, see <https://medium.com/@dr538/truth-lies-and-politics-dont-be-limited-by-mainstream-thought-lessness-2c6a2f890b41#.3z9h7mowd>

²⁵ [ItsTimetoListen.com](https://its timeto listen.com)

help users delve more deeply into the structural issues connected to police violence.

The Grassroots Reparations Campaign

On the second-year anniversary of Michael Brown's murder in 2016, TTP partnered with the Michael Brown Jr. Foundation, the St. Louis Artists, and StoryCorps (an oral history archive that facilitated youth workshops in Ferguson) to hold hearings that highlighted the impact of police violence on youth. During the hearings, I sat listening to stories of loss and hope, wondering how truth-telling might disrupt racialized police violence and other forms of structural injustice. One of the drummers who participated in the opening of the hearing later shared that many in his family were killed in the East St. Louis Race Riots of 1917 in which angry White mobs murdered Black people and stole and burnt their homes. Given the structural inequity our youth face and the urgent material needs of BIPOC communities, I began considering the connections between truth-telling and reparations (in line with work underway by the Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference²⁶ and the Equal Justice Initiative that has memorialized the trauma of lynching).

For Black folk, the trauma exhibited in the stories shared in Ferguson was compounded by the ongoing and systemic experiences of anti-Blackness that include gentrification, unemployment, insecure housing, cultural appropriation, and police violence. The murder of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Sean Read, Rayshard Brooks, and others, continue to retraumatize and contribute to ongoing, deep Black existential anxiety. Following that hearing, Cori Bush, Melinda Salazar and I wrote about the then-upcoming centennial anniversary of the East St. Louis race massacres in the context of ongoing police violence and truth and

²⁶ The Proctor Conference held a truth-telling hearing in Elaine, AR to address the legacy of racial terrorism and demand reparations: <https://sdpconference.info/truth-telling-reparatory-justice/>

reconciliation.²⁷ We argued that because of this continuing history, the focus should be on truth. However, we wanted to connect truth to reparations. I came to believe and write that “reparations is the midpoint between truth and reconciliation.”²⁸

In her book *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, Jennifer Harvey (2014) argues that if White people want racial reconciliation, they should pay reparations, which would replace dialogue-based approaches to reconciliation. I was troubled that a large portion of TTP’s audience, at that point, were White liberals who believed reconciliation and forgiveness (even more so than truth) were the best path to peace and racial justice. Traditional TRCs reflect the values of the nation-state system and the individual nations-states they seek to heal. TRC processes seek validity from public officials who may or may not have ties to the conflict and wish to maintain the integrity of the nation-state, often for economic rather than humanitarian reasons. Most of the transitional justice researchers and TRC practitioners I encounter are of European descent, while the conflicts they address are mostly in the nations of formerly colonized people. Because TRCs often focus on the immediate conflict without offering redress for the colonial past which continues to impact the present, we shifted the work of TTP to advocate for truth-telling processes that lead to reparations.

Over the course of the next few years, we launched the grassroots reparations campaign with over 20 other organizations. We saw a direct correlation between injustices visited upon Black people and unearned privileges of White people. Although former slave owners do not populate

²⁷ In Truth and Reconciliation, First thing’s First - The Truth:
<https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2017/08/16/in-truth-and-reconciliation-first-things-first-the-truth/>

²⁸ Reparations is the Midpoint Between Truth and Reconciliation
<https://medium.com/@dr538/the-midpoint-between-truth-and-reconciliation-is-reparations-cof8226iafif>

our cities, White people continue to benefit from the legacy of slavery and colonization because it built the world we inhabit. According to N'COBRA (the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America), reparations are a process of repairing, healing, and restoring a people injured because of their group identity and in violation of their fundamental human rights by governments, corporations, institutions, and families. Those groups that have been injured have the right to obtain from the government, corporations, institutions, or families responsible for the injuries, what they need to repair and heal themselves.

In addition to being a demand for justice, reparations are a principle of international human rights law. The United Nations recognizes the following five forms of reparations: 1) restitution: restoration of a victim's rights, property, citizenship status; 2) rehabilitation: psychological and physical support; 3) compensation; 4) satisfaction: acknowledgement of guilt, apology, burials, construction of memorials, etc.; and 5) guarantees of non-repetition: transformation of laws and civil and political structures that led to or fueled violence.²⁹ We saw a tremendous amount of possibilities for guarantees of non-repeat³⁰ because the principle asks that we change the underlying conditions leading to the violence. For us, this was a decolonial project, particularly in the United States where people are often separated from the harm that impacts others globally and from which they benefit. This principle is about unravelling ourselves from the complicity of colonized violence, which, for example, is embedded in corporate structures through abusive labor practices, extractive supply chains, investment, and

²⁹ See David Ragland Series on Reparations in Yes! Magazine: <https://www.yesmagazine.org/authors/david-ragland/> & the United Nations Development Program 2010, Report on Reparations, Gender and Development: <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/Kampala%20workshop%202011%20Reparations,%20Development%20and%20Gender.pdf>

³⁰ Guarantees of Non-Repeat Webinar <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpqyRGZ6oX4&t=2s>

direct abuse of incarcerated populations. Amos Wilson (1998) speaks to this understanding of reparations when he writes:

While prior forms of White domination and exploitation of Blacks may have ceased and desisted, the economic injustices and inequalities they imposed continue unabated. The legal prohibition of further injustices does not necessarily mean that the injurious effects of past injustices no longer persist...Justice requires not only the ceasing and desisting of injustice but also requires either punishment or reparation for injuries and damages inflicted for prior wrongdoing. The essence of justice is the redistribution of gains earned through the perpetration of injustice. If restitution is not made and reparations not instituted to compensate for prior injustices, those injustices are in effect rewarded. And the benefits such rewards conferred on the perpetrators of injustice will continue to "draw interest," to be reinvested, and to be passed on to their children, who will use their inherited advantages to continue to exploit the children of the victims of the injustices of their ancestors. Consequently, injustice and inequality will be maintained across the generations as will their deleterious social, economic, and political outcomes. (pp. 459-460)

While we were critical of international human rights language and instruments to speak to decolonial reparations, we followed the lead of organizers who spent decades working toward reparations.

We built on the work of N'COBRA and the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC), and we learned from the Reparations Now movement that successfully forced the city of Chicago to pay reparations to the victims of Chicago Police Commander John Burge who tortured over 120 Black men between 1972 and 1991.³¹ As a result of the

³¹ The Chicago Torture Justice Center was part of the reparations won to educate future generations <https://www.chicagotorturejustice.org/history>

ongoing work around reparations, we decided to create an approach that would support the existing projects and groups through education and encouraging followers to support that ongoing work. The grassroots reparations approach encourages people and institutions of moral conscience to reflect on their unfair advantages and do their part in repairing generations of structural discrimination and political inequality that have caused harm and trauma. It is necessary for spiritual and faith communities to be involved in the work of reparation required to heal and repair the legacy of slavery, the U.S. colonial past and lingering colonialities (Williams, 2016). We argued that these faith-based communities and institutions benefited from slavery³² and, as a result, they are called both to accept and acknowledge their complicity in the evil and structural injustices that formed the foundations of racism and White supremacy.

Often programs like affirmative action, school desegregation, and the fair housing program, which are viewed as racially-focused, fail to significantly impact Black communities because those efforts are focused on the symptoms of the injustice and not the root causes, and are administered by bureaucrats and politicians entrenched in White supremacy. For example, the Center for Investigative Journalism reports that current redlining practices (that perpetuate unfair housing policies leading to segregation) continue to fuel gentrification.³³ Examining over 3.1 million mortgages, investigators found that bankers routinely sidestepped the Fair Housing Act, as they are more likely to provide loans to Whites than to Black and Brown people. These and other practices reinforce the need for reparations.

³² Georgetown University was saved from financial ruin through the sale of slaves - <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/18/living/georgetown-slavery-service/index.html>, as well other seminaries and religious institutions like the Presbyterians have acknowledged benefitting from slavery, genocide and colonization of Indigenous lands

³³ Reveal News on Black Americans and mortgages <https://revealnews.org/blog/3-investigations-opened-after-reveal-uncovers-redlining-in-philly/>

The grassroots reparations campaign is primarily focused on shifting to a culture of reparations through education and spiritual practice. Based on the work of Dorothy Benton Lewis (1997), the culminating program of our campaign is Reparation Sundays (occurring twice a year). We organize faith-based communities to join us in a period of reflection culminating in a group to prepare their communities to begin taking on the responsibility of reparations. Reparations are a spiritual practice, not just a transaction. Each date begins with a period of preparation and is planned on historically significant dates. In the summer, we begin with Juneteenth (June 19) and undergo a period of preparation leading into the August Reparations Sunday. The period of preparations involves internal investigation, education, reflection and planning in the community for Reparations Sunday. In winter, the period of preparation begins on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery (December 2) and concludes on Reparations Sunday, which corresponds with Jubilee Freedom Day (December 21), commemorating one of the largest single days of emancipation of enslaved people in Savannah, Georgia in 1864. This event also led to the promise of forty acres for newly emancipated slaves, which was later rescinded by Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor.

We believe reparations are a relational practice of healing spiritual, moral, and material harm. One activist, Patt Gunn, created a commemoration that is now a city-wide celebration. This approach provides White people with ways they might engage in reparations, for their own healing and to shift the broader culture towards viewing accountability for past and ongoing harm as important. If a critical mass feel accountable for past harm, we believe the United States would then begin to see itself as responsible for human rights abuses, interventions, coups, and other forms of exploitation carried out by the military to benefit the United States.

Conclusion: Truth-Telling and Reparations as a Decolonial Project

In this moment, activism under the banner of Black Lives Matter has grown into a global movement. Amidst police violence, White terrorism in Charlottesville and, after the 2020 election, with White terrorists storming

the U.S. Capitol, there have been increased calls for racial justice and for defunding the police. In response to racial violence and injustice, over thirty truth and reconciliation processes have launched in U.S. cities. More than five of these processes are focused on “truth and reparations.”³⁴ The State of California; Evanston, Illinois; and Amherst, Massachusetts; among other communities, have launched reparations processes. One of the most blatantly fascist and racist U.S. presidents has left the White House. The first African American (and South Asian) woman has been elected Vice-President. One of the founding co-directors of the Truth Telling Project, Cori Bush, was sworn into Congress in early 2020 as the first Black woman to go to Congress from Missouri. Representative Bush unseated a fifty-two-year political dynasty to win election. The first openly gay Black man was elected in New York State, and the first Black person will go to the U.S. Senate from Georgia. While identity does not mean real progress, there is an unprecedented level of interest in racial reconciliation and reparations. These changes are the result of hundreds of years of truth-telling from the margins to change discriminatory policies, to address human rights abuses and remind the United States of its racist past linked to ongoing systemic oppression of BIPOC communities.

At the same time, corporations pushing for diversity and releasing statements that Black Lives Matter are simultaneously exploiting low-wage workers, using underpaid prison labor, and benefiting from the exploitation of workers from developing nations. Capitalism remains the driving impulse of the lingering colonialism and ongoing direct colonization in Palestine, genocide in Ambazonia, and repression in the Southern Saharan region of

³⁴ The Mayor of Providence, Rhode Island signed an executive order to launch a Truth and Reparations Process:

<https://amp.providencejournal.com/story/news/2020/07/16/providence-mayor-signs-order-to-pursue-truth-reparations-for-black-indigenous-people/42496067/>

Morocco. During an interview for *Quartz* online magazine,³⁵ I was asked if Chase Manhattan Bank owed reparations given their history of underwriting slavery. I responded that the depth of inequality and intergenerational harm required a holistic approach that could address the level of depraved indifference of White settler coloniality. We initially started truth-telling so that White folks could connect empathetically to people sharing their experiences, in a non-politicized way. It was not that White people did not respond to the testimonies and lesson plans, but we came to see White people and White culture as engrained and embodied. In a chilling reflection that speaks to our current moment, James Baldwin said, “she [referring to Lorraine Hansberry] was very worried about a civilization which could produce those five policeman standing on the Negro woman's neck. ...I'm terrified at the moral apathy. The death of the heart which is happening in my country. ...And this means that they have become, themselves, moral monsters.”³⁶

How does one deal with moral monsters? As recent as May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer kneeling on his neck despite his repeated pleas for help. An Asian American officer stood by, hand ready at his holster to prevent interference. In his book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) wonders how Europeans became White. He writes “...hate gives identity. The nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, of being a Man. We name the hated strangers and are thus confirmed in the tribe” (p. 60). Yet, this hate, according to noted Jungian psychoanalyst Dr. Fannie Brewster (2020), is the projection onto the

³⁵ The Debt U.S. Companies owe Black Americans https://qz.com/1897852/what-reparations-mean-for-companies/?fbclid=IwAR2Mvv8GwyOeEkFoa05-c7pCxc_vl82gGmo6r7mFrLgAA4URBpI3JfoufZw

³⁶ “Conversation with James Baldwin: https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_15-ov89g5gf5r

shadow.³⁷ Resma Menakem (2017) speaks to this query by looking at the unhealed trauma European immigrants imposed on the people they encountered. Truth-telling is merely a beginning, but needed and necessarily connected to reparations that disrupt the current order.

The entire society should have a stake in truth-telling and reparations. In the aforementioned interview, I proposed multi-sector truth-telling from impacted communities across the United States and truth-seeking within local, state, regional and national governments, for-profit and non-profit organizations, and families that benefited from slavery and the world it created. For White people, it is important to reconnect with ancestors to uncover family histories of trauma and understand the ways they benefited from colonial violence and slavery and continue to benefit from current forms of discrimination. Truth-telling and its outcome—reparations—must be about holding the United States accountable for its ongoing and past illegal military, political and economic interventions that destabilized democratically elected and often, ideologically opposed (communist and socialist) political regimes, in turn supporting authoritarian rule, in some cases, leading to the murder of thousands of non-White peoples by proxy and at times in person. Truth-telling and its outcome—reparations—demands accountability for the January 6, 2021 invasion of White terrorists (and their supporters—elected or otherwise) who overtook the U.S. Capitol seeking to murder and harm elected representatives. Unity and forgiveness should only come after accountability and elimination of the White supremacist crisis in the United States. Only then will the world see the United States as a nation that acts according to its laws and provides equal protection for all of its citizens.

³⁷ Fannie Brewster and David Ragland, spoke about Race in America, integrating the (Jungian) Shadow June 28, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XJuQa1DvDU>.

Truth-telling and truth-seeking as decolonial practice is about the moral and material harm that has been integral to the long struggle for the rights of Black folk, as it informs the content of a human rights pluriverse that is self-determined and demanding of repair. In addition to transitional justice, truth-telling also offers peace and human rights education authentic voices that speak to ways to reconsider the content and focus of the curricula. Truth-telling for communities impacted by lingering settler-colonial violence would similarly need to be at various levels, for the public, and supported without being overtaken by the government and foundations, who may have different agendas. The content, strategies, and practices of truth-telling must be a part of peace education, human rights education, restorative justice, and transitional justice. This is a call for decolonization that is beyond the metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Truth-telling asks us to call our ancestors into the circle, to begin healing the trauma that started with them, so that we might disrupt the internal and external structures and systems that maintain oppression.

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