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Radical Truth Telling from the Ferguson Uprising

An Educational Intervention to Shift the Narrative, Build Political Efficacy,
Claim Power, and Transform Communities

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"Who the fuck you callin' violent?"

Ferguson demonstrators response to media and police narrative
of Ferguson protests as violent

Introduction

This chapter describes the ideology and development of the Truth Telling Project of Ferguson, as an initiative responding to the sociopolitical environment of emerging social movement consciousness, the growing interest in restorative and transitional justice as strategies to educate and disrupt state-sanctioned police violence. The starting point for this inquiry is understanding the manifestations of structural violence as rooted in unaddressed historical trauma inducing violence and crime against African Americans, Indigenous and non-white people, that live invisibly in the current political, economic, and security apparatus of the United States. Truth telling, as an organic act and community initiative, is offered as one grassroots intervention that learns from history, critical frameworks, and authentic voices, to share stories to uncover systemic and direct violence, while initiating healing, and narrative change.

While political officials, law enforcement, mainstream media, and conservatives consider protests violent, there is little acknowledgment of police violence and the social conditions that make violence inevitable. At the same time, civil disobedience, while often considered violent, is not. In 2015, the year after Michael Brown was killed, the *Guardian* (UK) reported that the rate of African Americans murdered by police in the United States was three times that of any other racial group.¹ This rate of police violence leveled at black communities in the States raises the existential threat, making more visible the disposable nature of black bodies in this society. Recently, one of my students described how he paid less attention to black murders since they "happen all the time," given the instantaneous transmission of video that proliferates through social media. Despite video evidence (Sexton 2016), the US legal system rarely holds police

1 www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database.

accountable (Madar 2014).² Given the legacy of injustice that characterizes US dealings with black folk, intergenerational harm, trauma, and structural and direct violence continue to teach marginalized communities about the value of their lives. These teachings simultaneously induce silence and continued violence because of the intransigence of racism and white supremacy in many institutions and policies that deal with marginalized communities. In the United States, Ferguson became the flashpoint in confronting the racist past that reverberates throughout of American life.

The treatment of blacks, people of color (POC), and those that identify differently from the "mainstream" provides the clearest example of continued and unacknowledged white supremacy and class and race privilege. For example, an Arizona legislator recently introduced a law to ban any "activity or course which discusses social justice, skin privilege, or racial equality" (King 2017). While many have become numb to state-sanctioned violence, those with *othered* identities feel an increased threat. It is troubling that more people are not deeply distressed by the suspension of citizens' rights in Ferguson, Baltimore, and cities around the country as protesters attempt to express constitutionally guaranteed rights to dissent. At the same time, the voices that are heard, most significantly impacting change are from those with identity privilege. Even thought urgently important, the students of Parkland merit white house visits within days of the tragic school shooting; and the #metoo movement sees the immediate high level investigations. In 2017 National Public Radio reported how sexual harassment and assault of black women are silenced. (<https://www.npr.org/2017/12/03/568133048/women-of-color-and-sexual-harassment>) Even the #metoo black woman creator was ignored when she initially launched the campaign. As well, the emergence of Columbine-like shootings resulted in zero tolerance policies in black and brown communities, where mass-school shootings were less likely (Stahl 2016). We might question if the United States, given its foundational violence of genocide, slavery, and colonialism, can recognize the full humanity of the black population and POC in the margins without an intervention that acknowledges and disrupts white supremacy, privilege, and history lived out in the current social landscape.

To be sure, state-sanctioned and racialized violence have always been present³ since colonial times. This history and the images of Michael Brown lying on the ground in the simmering heat of August in Ferguson, Eric Garner being choked by officers, Sandra Bland being assaulted by Texas law enforcement, and the recent slew of footage showing violence against black people led to increased civil disobedience throughout the United States. The Ferguson protests initiated new kind of vibrancy characteristic of this generation of youth and protesters. The chants "fuck the police" and "the whole damn system is guilty as hell" reiterated a deep sense of frustration and distrust of the traditional authority and power located in the state apparatus that continuously violates the dignity of communities of color. With a consciousness recognizing the deep structural violence, victimized people refused to soften the truth, especially when that often meant denying the extent of traumatization caused by the slave trade and racism embedded broadly across US economic, political, and educational (and other) institutions.

² In 2014, After Eric Garner was murdered by Pantaleo and other NYPD officers, Ramsey Orta, who filmed the deadly encounter, was the only one to face charge: https://www.democracynow.org/2016/7/13/two_years_after_eric_garner_s. Also see Park and Lee's (2017) *New York Times* article showing the absence of accountability for murder of blacks by police.

³ No law requires the United States to keep track of demographic information for police-involved shooting (Grothaus 2015).

While protests dramatize underlying issues that society has been unwilling to address, the truth telling in Ferguson has offered an alternative narrative; shedding light on contradictions, intentionally produced ignorance and silence, and unaddressed past wrongs that have contributed to current structural and direct violence too harsh for some to admit as reality. The waves of African Americans escaping the terrorism of the Jim Crow South in the Great Migration between 1916 and 1970 encountered structural racism in the form of housing covenants, redlining, predatory financial policies, and brutal policing to halt movement toward decent housing, schooling, and employment in suburban communities like Ferguson (Coates 2015; Rogers 2015; Rothstein 2014). Predatory policing, reinforcing this de facto segregation, was the catalyst sparking the radical truth telling that began in response to the humiliating murder of Michael Brown Jr. on August 9, 2014. The ensuing protest was a kind of revolutionary theater, attempting to teach America despite its refusal to learn. As LeRoi Jones (also known as Amiri Baraka) said: "The Revolutionary Theater ... should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness ... but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments" (1965). The truth telling in the protests, while angry, were demand-oriented cries to disrupt the comfort of the larger society in hopes they would address the injustices perpetrated on historically marginalized communities. Protestors and their demands for "black lives [to] matter" were characterized as violent. This myopic view is the default setting for media and many who side with abusive law enforcement, despite the realities of policing in black communities – which many of us consider remnants of slave patrols and "lingering colonialities" (Williams 2016) that reinforce white supremacy.⁴

In this context, the Truth Telling Project of Ferguson (TTP) emerged as a community initiative and educational intervention, rooted in restorative and transformative justice, to challenge narratives that justify harm leveled against black people, while building community efficacy through the telling of stories that reflect the experience of those most victimized by direct and structural violence.

New Movement, New Values

Despite the media and the broader public's disdain and critiques, we told our stories to anyone who would listen. Similar communities, experiencing the same kind of direct and structural violence, joined in solidarity immediately after the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. The onslaught of news reporting contributed to an organic engagement in civil disobedience. People who had never protested took to the streets to confront police killings in their own cities. Ferguson and Baltimore provided the play-book for protests, and the hashtag #Black Lives Matter (BLM) encapsulated an idea and sentiment that came to articulate the sense of this political moment. Alicia Garza (2014) articulates 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."

⁴ Part of the colonial project was valuing all things white and not valuing the indigenous. Williams (2016) describes the colonial structures in schooling which continued after the formal end of colonialism through institutions, systems, and behaviors. The lingering behavior is often reflected in preferences for persons with skin tone or hair texture similar to European phenotypes.

BLM is a global moral claim meant to address structures that posit black lives as less valuable, and thus dispensable. 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 acknowledgment [of] Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 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.

The momentum and energy of Ferguson-like protests, with this ideology, expanded the sense that black worth extends beyond the respectability politics. The focus on the murders of black men, women, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people, immigrants, and many other marginalized intersecting black identities, unleashed a global movement. In a forthcoming chapter, Arthur Romano and I write: “The statement “Black Lives Matter” came to represent a moral claim of human dignity and full personhood despite the generations denying the value of black life through systemic practices of indignity and humiliation. This moral claim for human dignity expresses the particularity of ethical requirements often denied by state power to communities of color” (Romano and Ragland, 2018).

Fuad Al-Daraweesh and Dale Snauwaert (2015) point out the specificity of human dignity as they describe the need for rights to acknowledge and be consistent with respect for identity. This line of thinking reinforces the sanctity of cultural identity and its needs, which cannot be reduced or generalized given the deep marginalization and disenfranchisement of various groups. This systematized treatment – that is, racial and economic discrimination and specific school-based structural violence of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities – includes policies described in the *Color of Wealth* (Lui et al. 2006), which are structurally violent. As Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert argue, “if we are moral equals, and if our identity is inseparable from our culture, then what follows in principle is a right to cultural recognition. In turn, if we have a right, justified claim, to cultural recognition, then the others are obligated to respect our cultural heritage (2015, 22).

The statement “Black Lives Matter” challenges rote equality present in color-blind approaches that fail to recognize the need for equity to account for the systematic denial of the rights (through voter suppression and ID laws, inequity in school funding, etc.), which disproportionately impact black and brown communities. To assert that “Black Lives Matter” expresses an awakened consciousness and sense of agency in seeking redress for centuries of systemic violence (Romano and Ragland 2018).

This moral claim about the value of black bodies is part of an uninterrupted expression of worth, continuing from early modern-era encounters of black and indigenous peoples with Europeans; from fighting against capture, to resistance on slave ships, to struggle throughout the Americas and Europe against imperialism, to civil rights movements, to black power, to decolonial struggles of past decades, and to the current movement for

black lives, ecological justice, LGBTQ rights, Standing Rock, and many of the current intersecting social justice struggles.

Truth telling, as a process in this social movement ideology and context, provides a culturally rooted and theorized space for such expression. The denial of moral worth for these populations allows, reinforces, and structures conditions and spaces where internal community violence purportedly justifies the use of violence against black and brown bodies. In this sense, injustice is structurally violent and connected to direct violence. For example, Martin Luther King described the riots in the 1960s as a manifestation of people denied human dignity and forced into ghettos and poor communities.

Schools, which ought to be spaces that foster democracy, peace, and justice, for example (Apple and Beane 1995; Snauwaert 2009), are often both directly violent and structurally violent (Reardon 1988; Williams 2013). Public education policies and practices in the United States provide clear examples of structural violence and the importance of truth telling about the intersections of poverty, lack of equitable funding for urban schools, increased policing, arrests of black and brown students for minor infractions, deficit-based teaching, and pedagogies with little regard for student identity representation and acknowledgment.

From the perspective of Hakim Williams, Caribbean decolonization and critical peace education scholar, the violence embedded in schools and their colonial structures provides an example for how the worldview and European epistemological construction of knowledge and value are imposed in former colonies (2016).

In US communities of color, a similar relationship exists between the way education is administered and the way it is practiced. Instead of increased funding or recruiting more teachers that might relate to students, urban schools are more likely to have police, metal detectors and bars, teachers and administrations that utilize law enforcement to discipline students (Stoughton and Gupta-Kagan 2015), as well as high-stakes testing regimes that impact student behavior and teacher discipline (Au 2011; Figlio 2006; McIntosh et al. 2008). The rote pedagogies and policies (No Child Left Behind, zero tolerance, for example) imposed on the economically challenged, which often overlap with POC communities, reinforce a narrow way of learning and administering schools that have less to do with student intellectual development, ability to empathize with others, or the capacities to think critically. Most US students experience education as reinforcing the status quo, a situation that Hannah Arendt's (1954) prophetic essay "Crisis in Education" warned against (Arendt 2006). For students of color, this structural violence is multiplied through the Eurocentric lens constituting de facto colonized education, as highlighted in the critical scholarship of *Education for Extinction* (Adams 1995) and the *Mis-education of the Negro* (Woodson 1998).⁵

TTP and the organic truth telling about injustice in the protests, between neighbors, and on social media is a response to the humiliation of white supremacy, but more importantly, it is an expression of political efficacy challenging the lingering colonial narrative. Intergenerational trauma is present in the stories and bodies that bear witness to the daily replaying of history. The dialectic of elite violence and imposition of values onto black, indigenous, and POC personhood are embedded in American

⁵ *Education for Extinction* describes the imposition of white culture onto Native Americans in "Indian boarding schools," while *Mis-education of the Negro* adds to this description by pointing out how white supremacy is imposed on black persons through formal and informal modes of social education.

institutions, teaching American institutions how to re-enact violence, since the status quo offers complicity for some and a resulting unwillingness to consider other experiences. The ideological indoctrination supports public and institutional complicity, while TTP breaks the cycle, as organic informal education through expression and narrative sharing to reassert basic autonomy and democracy.

When faced with what our youth and the broader society learn from the hypocrisy in the expressed values of democracy and equality versus the reality of racism and denial of that racism, the ignorance and blindness to unjust conditions, while not condoned, is understandable. Yet the power elite utilize the blindness and ignorance of "all lives matter (and blue lives matter)" mantras for their benefit. This blindness is racist, and therefore structurally violent. Truth telling (as a process connected to transitional and restorative justice) is concerned, at theoretical and practical levels, with uncovering structural violence which leads to and is often reinforced by direct violence. TTP addresses police violence leveled against black and brown people, as the tip of an iceberg grounded in racism, white supremacy, and various forms of systematized injustice.

Framing Truth Telling and Violence through Coloniality, Critical Race Theory, and Peace Education

each thousand years
of our silence
is examined
with regret,
and the cruel manner in which our values
of compassion and kindness
have been ridiculed
and suppressed [must be]
brought to bear on the disaster
of the present time.
The past must be examined closely, I believe, before we can leave
it there ...

Alice Walker, "Democratic Womanism"

Our attempts to come to grips with this troubling, oppressive, violent past and to understand the ongoing racial injustice and suppression of subaltern voices are often pacified and given cursory attention in efforts to "move on," "unify and bring people together," "provide a solution," and even "make peace." Attempts at discourse meant to address structural violence in communities experiencing systemic injustices often amount to what Amartya Sen describes as "cultural violence": marginalizing local voices in communities, imposing solutions to "fix" them. Sen writes: "[W]ell meaning attempts at pursuing global peace can have very counterproductive consequences when these attempts are founded on fundamentally illusory understandings of the world of human beings."⁶ Because surface understandings of culture have enormous implications that

⁶ http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2006/03/what_clash_of_civilizations.html. Adapted from Sen (2006).

colonialism bears witness to, deeper understanding, expertise, and leadership from the local communities are imperative. In peace education (peace and conflict studies), the core problematic is violence (Barash and Webel 2009; Ragland 2015; Reardon 1988). The ultimate approach, as this section describes, relies on the critique of violence. As well, at their moral core, peace education, critical race, and decolonization approaches attend specificity of human dignity as expressed by current social movements. Human dignity is an urgent matter of justice, which, I argue, constitutes peace (Ragland 2015).

The elements of coloniality/decolonization and critical race theory are essential to understanding structural violence (Bajaj 2008; Diaz-Soto 2005; Fontan 2012; Ragland 2009, 2014, 2015b; Williams 2015). Peace education, peace and conflict studies, conflict resolution and transformation theory, restorative justice and human rights education have contributed analyses, but often are Eurocentric and global North-centric (Bajaj 2008; Ragland 2009, 2015b; Tandon 1989; Williams 2015). We pivot here to consider how peace education approaches embodying critical race theory and the subaltern/voices from the margins as reflexive lens respond to violence and offer framing for restorative community practice.

Peace Education and Violence

When we think of violence, we often stop at physical violence without thinking of structural violence. In the current social movement, people of color are being engaged across the globe to demand an end both to structural and to direct violence, seeking new acknowledgment, recognition, and reparation required by human dignity. Betty Reardon, who is known as the founder of the American approach to peace education, defines violence (within the context of peace education) as “avoidable, intentional harm, inflicted for a purpose or perceived advantage of the perpetrator or of those who, while not direct perpetrators, are, however, advantaged by the harm” (Reardon and UNESCO, 2001, 35). This definition has been used by numerous peace education scholars in their descriptions of violence and the role and purposes of peace education (Ardizzone 2007; Jenkins 2008; Navarro-Castro and Nario-Galace 2008; Snauwaert 2009). This peace education critique does the important work of characterizing structural injustice of capitalism as violent, impacting the lives of marginalized people in and outside of the United States. For instance, financial investments for many people are in companies that produce weapons used against innocent communities, inflicting long-lasting harm on natural habitats⁷.

Peace educators consider violence the core problematic of *peace* and *education*. Reardon, drawing on Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), points out that

⁷ The processes of slavery and colonization transferred wealth, in terms of humans and resources, from Africa, the Americas, and Asia to Europe under the guise of civilizing the uncivilized. The colonial project was only about accumulating capital. Tandon (1989) argues that there is a direct relationship of disparity between poverty in the global South and wealth in Europe and the United States. Capitalism is not just the spread of Western products to the far corners of the globe, but the arms trade, which sees Western manufactured arms sold to the elite of the global South, not for any humanitarian reasons, but for money (Kisembo 1993; Mirra 2008).

no education is neutral and that underlying values of many societies go unquestioned. She writes:

It is important to emphasize here that the peace knowledge field has identified various forms of violence. In addition to the politically organized violence of war and various forms of repression, and the structural violence of neocolonial economic institutions there is, as well, social violence such as racism, sexism and religious fundamentalism, and the cultural violence of patriarchal institutions, blood sports, and the glorification of violent historical events in national holidays and the banalization of violence in the media. And now, all of these forms of violence are being seen in their totality as a "culture of violence and war." (Reardon 2000, 8)

Violence is identified here as values, practices, and systems that devalue subaltern perspectives. Reardon points out how understanding the content, however, is not central to the understanding of most peace education.

Conceptually, peace education includes negative peace, positive peace and structural violence. Negative peace is the absence of violence or war. Positive peace is the absence of war and the presence of justice, moving toward the elimination of structural violence. Forms of structural or "indirect" violence include racism, sexism, homophobia, economic injustice, xenophobia, and cultural appropriation. While many in peace education study the forms of structural violence, the core of scholars, underlying theories, and the practice remain Eurocentric and uncritical of the deep complicity and trauma of racism and colonialism (Bajaj 2008; Diaz-Soto 2005). Azarmandi (2016, 158) writes: "Normative Peace Studies remains very much embedded in concepts of liberal peace, which are inherently state-centric and negative peace-oriented. Such an outlook is also inherently blind to questions of race and colonialism."

While the fields of peace education and conflict studies attempt to address physical violence and structural violence, the failure to acknowledge coloniality and racism continues to generate blind spots in analysis and development.⁸ These blind spots can be used in neoliberal agendas that promote peace and non-violence abroad and in black and other POC communities, while failing to acknowledge state-sanctioned and state-inspired violence of the police, military, and global policy. US foreign policy planner George Kennan articulates a disinterested, even anti-human rights, orientation toward the relationship between the global South and the United States when he writes:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6.3% of its population ... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships, which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we must dispense with all the sentimentality and day dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. (Kennan cited in Abunimah and Arnove 2000, 11)

⁸ Many development, non-governmental organization, and international education workers rely on peace education and peace and conflict studies scholarship to ground their work.

While realism would absolve the immorality of this view, a critical race, coloniality, and peace education orientation would critique Kennan's principles as clear examples of structural violence and neocolonialism, which hides the reality of economic coercion and of graft in order to gain access for extractive development practices on natural resources and indigenous bodies (Fanon 1963).

When there is no pedagogy of acknowledgment or accurate representation of subaltern experience and identity, education is violent and unjust (Bajaj 2008; Lynn, Jennings, and Hughes 2013). Since the concept of structural violence has a normative- human rights framework, it is considered a form of violence because the conditions of structural violence often cause harm to mental and physical health and overall well-being, and provide the conditions for direct violence or war (Galtung 1969; Ho 2007; Montesanti and Thurston 2015; Ragland 2015; Rylko-Bauer and Farmer 2016; Steenkamp 2005).

Understanding Coloniality While Centering Critical Race Pedagogy and Womanism to Ground Truth Telling

The imperialist system is anti-truth and anti-science.

Yash Tandon, "Peace Education: Its Concepts and Problems and Its Application to Africa"

The extractive nature of colonization continues in the conduct of majority institutions toward racialized minority communities. This conduct maintains the status quo, hegemonic property rights, and the flow of capital. During the Ferguson protests, the protection of property was the justification given for the militarized policing. The historical parallel phenomena of slaves-as-property and current criminal justice systems and policing, of slave catcher patrols police practices, continue to be relevant (Alexander 2012; Mac 2016; Silverii 2014)⁹. Non-violent protests of the past and of the present are met with the full force of national guards, militarized police, and deputized security. In these actions, law enforcement and political officials communicate the value of social order over human needs and lives. Thus, the theoretical frameworks of coloniality/ decolonization and critical race theory and pedagogy (CRT/CRP), were natural connections informing the M4BL (Movement for Black Lives)¹⁰ and TTP.

In part, the view from the subaltern, black, and brown experience recognizes race as a proxy for white elitist capitalism. Bell (1987, 1992) explains how the presence of African slaves became an identifiable distinction, allowing poor whites to identify more closely with elite white, male landowners. While natives could escape more easily, blacks and their offspring were slaves for life, highlighting the deplorable conditions of

9 http://www.democracynow.org/2016/7/14/ex_seattle_police_chief_condemns_systemic; http://www.blackagenda.com/slave_patrols_police_terror; <http://countercurrentnews.com/2015/04/police-originated-from-slave-catching-patrols/>.

10 The Movement for Black Lives denotes many organizations, actions, and ideals focused on global black liberation, in this current political manifestation that grew initially from the Ferguson protests. Later, the term "Black Lives Matter" was problematically used by media to describe the entire movement – silencing voices from Ferguson, Baltimore, New York City, and communities around the world working toward the goals of black liberation.

slavery. Swartz (2015) describes the line of reasoning used by poor whites to express racial superiority: "At least I'm not a nigger." This retort speaks to the hierarchy of race created by the life-long conditions of black servitude. The superiority (both actual power superiority and perceptual) enjoyed by whites endures from the time blacks were property, free labor, or an easily exploitable class. As a litany of literature explains, although formal slavery ended, it persisted in different forms, such as sharecropping, debt discrimination, and so forth.¹¹ Each generation is re-traumatized by new iterations of previously used mechanisms (Alexander 2012; Blackmon 2008, Zinn 1990).

But alongside intergenerational trauma, resilience and knowledge of the impact of systems of oppression are also passed down. New understandings that make ideas like intersectionality, restorative justice, and womanism prominent offer counter-approaches to just transformation of our society.

Ferguson and the Truth Telling Project (TTP)

In the Truth Telling Project, we embrace that notion that storytelling is a form of resilience as well as dissent, as it shifts the narrative, centering marginalized voices. Formal education, adult learning, and community spaces often exclude the historical truth of struggle and trauma carried from generation to generation. Although peace education, in my own educational experience, helped me to question and deconstruct violence and contextualize racism, I began to see the frameworks, while useful, as limiting and only speaking to the experience of an audience. With the throwing asunder of respectability politics in the Movement for Black Lives, I started to connect the missing elements of peace education with the truth of coloniality, particularly because of the global implications of transitional justice. In describing the pedagogical approach of truth telling, Arthur Romano and I write:

Critical race pedagogy, especially in this context, acknowledges the unsaid as a core part of transformational learning ... Critical race pedagogy, applied to truth telling, seeks to challenge silence about racial oppression, to engage with structural racism, and to recognize the intersectional nature of systemic oppression by attending to ways of knowing that honor black culture and positions experience of community members as truth and connect them with other forms of marginalization and resistance. (Romano and Ragland 2018)

I had been informally studying restorative justice in K–12 circles and integrating the practice in my own teaching practices. I had also been writing about critiques of peace education as being too focused on and centering Eurocentric values, scholars, and research. Then, Pastor Cori Bush and I began working closely together. (She had been much more integrated in the protest community, supporting and providing leadership to the youth protesters.)

11 A Propublica report describes how debt is unequally and often fraudulently collected in black communities, with St. Louis as ground zero: <https://www.propublica.org/article/debt-collection-lawsuits-squeeze-black-neighborhoods>.

Responding to economic injustice and inequity, TTP focuses on capacity development for the most marginalized identities. It works to make its professional pedagogy consistent with ideology, practices, and principles of leadership developed by the larger social movement of Black Lives Matter as a way to maintain accountability for placing the truth in the foreground. TTP came to represent a unity of ideas rooted in the experience and needs of the Ferguson/St. Louis protest community, beginning as a coalition between St. Louis-based and other national community and advocacy groups, to support local truth and reconciliation efforts. While many were cautious of the idea of reconciliation, because it was perceived to be focused on forgiveness, truth telling as an idea and a focus on healing efforts was welcomed.

Weekly conversations with TRC (truth and reconciliation commission) experts led to the Truth Telling Weekend in March of 2015, where experts and community members came to learn more about truth and reconciliation and to decide if it was a useful strategy. The mission statement developed in the months following the convening continues as:

The Truth Telling Project implements and sustains grassroots, community-centered truth-telling processes to share local voices, to educate America, and to support reconciliation for the purposes of eliminating structural violence and systemic racism against Black people in the United States.¹²

With consultation from the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,¹³ TTP created a focused mandate and declaration of intent to hear testimony through 2016 that would be shared widely in order to document US state-sanctioned violence and express experiences of marginalized communities. Rather than creating a formal commission, TTP emerged as a community-based project because (i) most TRCs are nation-state sponsored, with interests that are primarily state-centered; (ii) because of the current conditions, distrust of the state was high due to perceived government complicity in repression at local levels; (iii) the impact of Ferguson saw the creation of many commissions that to date have not generated structural transformation; and (iv) transitional justice suggests that there is a formal end of conflict, while police violence continues and trauma, distrust, and resentment resurface among marginalized people and communities.

The truth telling hearings began in November of 2015 in Ferguson, MO. Over 30 participants shared their experiences of police violence, and stated 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 processes.

TTP organizers developed educational materials and dialogue frameworks¹⁴ to support groups in other locales in understanding the tensions and commitments

12 <http://thetruthtellingproject.org>.

13 <http://www.greensborotrc.org>.

14 TTP Night of A Thousand Conversations – Guide and FAQ to support community dialogue after watching testimony of those victimized by police violence. Conversation Guide: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1RkIXhZFa0_UktIT0NmZGIpSTg/view?usp=sharing; FAQ for facilitators: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1RkIXhZFa0_LWhjZ05TTUFZTE0/view?usp=sharing.

embedded in this emerging approach to truth telling. These materials were informed by the truth telling hearings and forums.

In addition to the hearings, community conversations, and a host of connected events sponsored by the Truth Telling Project, one primary concern continues to be with the importance of truth. By giving attention to black individuals who are victimized by police violence, TTP attempts to uplift the narrative of communities whose story is often not believed. This engaged narrative development attempts to resituate the notion of truth within oppressed communities instead of its more prevalent presence in white-dominated institutions.¹⁵

TTP emerged with the understanding that truth telling can be leveraged toward healing and structural change if rooted in a community's values and understandings of the world. The need for acknowledgment of shared experiences of racialized violence and their root causes can bring communities together.

Conclusions, Educational Implications, and Possibilities

We imagined that, like the Ferguson protests and the public testimonies held in South Africa, Colombia, Greensboro, and many other places, the public hearings needed to convey the drama of the political moment and incidents of violence to speak to the hearts of our citizens. At the core of this form of storytelling is an educational experiment and intervention aimed at disrupting the dominant narrative and explaining how POC movements must be understood by mainstream Americans as necessary to fulfill the promises of democracy and rights in the United States. The sharing of stories in this way connects the deeper reality of individual stories with larger systemic forms of violence, and makes more palpable the solidarity needed to end police violence and other related forms of structural violence.

To say "experiment" is not to dilute the project we have undertaken, but to express our willingness to deal with our own healing, stories, and capacious justice. From the perspective of a community with deep distrust of the US economic and justice systems, TTP, as a grassroots project, has been a necessary act of empowerment and validation. Truth tellers shared their experiences as an educative and loving act to reach out to as many people as possible, while healing and validating the similar experiences and pain of others.

When Toni Taylor, mother of Cary Ball Jr., described the amount of bullets in her son's body;¹⁶ or when Michael Brown Jr.'s sisters talked of missing their big brother, the prankster, who was always smiling;¹⁷ or when the sister of Sandra Bland, Shonda Needem, teared up at the thought of Sandra's nieces and nephews never seeing their Auntee again,¹⁸ it was all to heal and to acknowledge the feelings of shared

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

16 Toni Taylor spoke as a truth teller in November 2015 at the Truth Telling Initiative launch in Ferguson, MO; see article written about her testimony: <https://medium.com/@thetruthtellingproject/listening-and-understanding-in-racist-america-3c814101a140#.i3favbize>.

17 The sisters of Michael Brown spoke at the Truth Telling Hearing in August 2016 in Ferguson, MO

18 Shonda Needam spoke as a truth teller in November 2015 at the Truth Telling Initiative launch in Ferguson, MO.

experiences, to come together to prevent future police violence, and to connect empathetically.

Some critiques assert that truth telling can become an echo chamber or, if focused solely on racial justice without an outward posture (a particular aspect of restorative justice that confronts victimizers), might prevent healing and even re-traumatize truth tellers (King 2011). From another critique: “truth-telling easily devolves into retributive constructions of justice defeating the goal of reconciliation. Geared to looking backwards to focus on blame and punishment, this kind of ‘truth’ tends to leave the broader systems of injustice unchallenged” (Davis and Scharrer forthcoming).

While these critiques may hold much general truth, the core understanding of TTP emerged from Ferguson community members who understood that truth and reconciliation is desirable, but that reconciliation would not be possible without structural transformation, that is, ending the conditions that allow police violence to flourish. The beginning of any TRC process, according to Imani Scott (2014), author of *Crimes against Humanity in the Land of the Free: Can a Truth and Reconciliation Process Heal Racial Conflict in America?*, requires truth telling, which is a “searching moral inventory” that the entire society must undertake. This first step requires society to listen, learn, and make changes based on the understanding gleaned from truth telling.

Ferguson did teach society, but the wrong lesson was learned. For instance, the “Ferguson effect” has become a widely used phrase in law enforcement, referring to civil disobedience. In some instances, police claimed they were afraid to do their work. Many in law enforcement began suggesting there was a “war on cops” despite crime rates dropping by “50 percent from 1994 through the first half of 2014” (MacDonald 2016).¹⁹ This rhetoric reinforces support for violent policing practices in communities of color because of negative attitudes toward communities claiming their rights. The recent election and vast right-wing sweep of political offices throughout the United States reflects an identification of mainstream America with law and order politics and conservative and sometimes racist values.²⁰

Despite the current sentiments, the Truth Telling Project promotes a reconsideration of how we conceive of the notion of justice, which often is minimized in retributive terms and as maintenance of social order. Based on the healing and reconciliation possible in restorative and transformative approaches²¹ that ground TTP on an interpersonal level, restorative justice is preferred (Latimer, Dowden, and Muise, 2005). TTP looks for the same kind of relational transformation at the structural level.

19 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2016/07/21/more-on-the-ferguson-effect-and-responses-to-critics/?utm_term=.914795ffd926; also see <https://www.policeone.com/community-policing/articles/194645006-4-ways-to-stave-off-the-Ferguson-effect/>.

20 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/03/03/researchers-have-found-strong-evidence-that-racism-helps-the-gop-win/?utm_term=.f1a95997ef82.

21 <http://www.eastbaytimes.com/2014/12/09/guest-commentary-restorative-justice-program-has-become-a-vital-tool-for-public/>; <http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/cook-county-to-create-community-court-in-north-lawndale/>.

Truth Telling as American Educational Intervention

Since the current political landscape is mired with “good intentions” and a fear of addressing racism in meaningful ways, few ways educate white allies and bystanders on the most marginalized perspectives. TTP is gathering the recorded testimony, launching an online learning platform, “the Truth Telling Commons,” to go beyond official transitional justice reporting mechanisms. Through this platform, the Truth Telling commons will seek to equip learners with (i) deep listening skills to prepare learners for authentic hearing of video and audio personal accounts from individuals who experienced police brutality; (ii) the opportunity to begin reflection on white allyship with persons of color and their encounters with state-sanctioned direct and indirect violence and racism; and (iii) the capacity to follow listening, learning, and reflection with action.

We expect that the Truth Telling Commons will document inequity by bridging what is often a gap between data on racial injustices and empathic connections needed to act against racially charged direct and indirect violence enacted on people of color. We also hope it will foster political efficacy in communities through extending marginalized, authentic voices to educate and break through racial stereotypes, apathy, and inaction. Through sharing the experiences of black communities and our experiences with police violence, the online learning platform, “It’s Time to Listen,” is rooted in a community of healing and support, as it develops political strength. It seeks to foster and disseminate stories and testimonies, engaging with the local and national community of human rights and racial justice. While the platform assists in alternative narrative building, it also connects partner organizations by guiding users to issues that emerge from testimonies to become active with groups working on those same issues. The stories fill in the gaps for national and global audiences as they witness an empowered community that shares its testimony and informs the world of how their stories bring clarity to the larger landscape of police violence with structural racism at its core. Our stories illustrate the specificity of human dignity and this platform and its dissemination will connect learners to this orientation to inform their work.

The target audience is threefold: (i) adult and high school age educators, dialogue facilitators; (ii) adult and high school age learners; (iii) white allies for racial justice. While the primary purpose of this platform is to house testimony from the Ferguson Truth Telling Hearings, the educational outreach is a core focus for working toward racial justice, sharing stories widely per the wishes of community members telling them. The target audiences of adult and high school age educators and dialogue facilitators, including, but not limited to, educators/teachers, Sunday school/religious educators, professional social work circles, after-school community education groups and dialogue groups focused on racial justice, whiteness and similarly related groups will be introduced to the online learning toolkit through four regional workshops, webinars, and an online facilitation guide. The demographic of the adult learners and high school age learners the educators will reach out to are primarily white, aged 14–64, middle- to working-class socioeconomic status, liberal to moderate leaning, aware of some injustices, but with limited knowledge and wary of asking questions about racial issues.

The videos included in the online learning platform are of individuals sharing stories of loss and trauma that learners can use to connect ordinary experiences rooted in bias and their own personal narratives and families. The questions that emerge from videos

are easily answerable with links, popups, cartoons, and lesson plans that educate users on terms like “structural racism” or “racial profiling.” The learning platform humanizes subjects to connect with learner empathy and intellect. The online platform, the current Movement for Black Lives, and the work of this project represent critical voices and approaches from the margins, extending and reaching out to the broader public to offer authentic testimonies and narratives that inform us of the most pressing concerns of this society.

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