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Truth, Reconciliation, and the Ku Klux Klan

David Cunningham

“[Trials are] about individual culpability, not about the system as a whole. Trials set up an ‘us versus them’ dynamic. A trial is not about our complicity. It makes it look like they’re guilty, not us.”

—Paul van Zyl, South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission senior staff member



One of the Eisenhower Commission’s primary targets was the Ku Klux Klan, linked at that point to hundreds of acts of racial terror perpetrated by some of its approximately 17,000 dues-paying members. In 1964, the FBI had identified seventeen independent “Klans” — the largest of which, by far, was the United Klans of America. Billy Flowers, an Exalted Cyclops of the Johnston County chapter of the UKA, stands in front of his billboard on the outskirts of Smithfield, North Carolina, photographed by Pete Young, courtesy of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.



On June 21, 2005, exactly forty-one years after the murder of Civil Rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman in Neshoba County, Mississippi, former Ku Klux Klan member Edgar Ray Killen was convicted on manslaughter charges for those crimes. The national press widely framed the outcome of his high-profile trial as belated justice served, as well as a vehicle for broader closure and redemption for the community. But, for a crime allegedly perpetrated by at least twenty-one people—including the county Sheriff, who had openly, and successfully, campaigned on his ability to sternly “cope” with the state’s influx of “racial agitators”—not everyone found the verdict entirely satisfying. David Dennis, who was a central figure in the 1964 Freedom Summer project that had brought Schwerner and Goodman to Mississippi, has consistently argued that the murders were, in truth, a statewide conspiracy to deny basic rights to African Americans. Ben Chaney, James’s brother, similarly spoke of the need to recognize that “rich and powerful” elements associated with the plot continue to escape the reach of the law. Voices in the activist legal community have echoed this call, referring to these far-reaching networks of culpability as the “matrix of involvement.”¹

While additional trials for others directly implicated in the murder plot could help untangle that matrix by forcing the accused to be accountable for their actions, the redemptive potential of the legal process appears to be more limited. A criminal trial, by its very nature, focuses on the narrow question of whether a standard of proof has been met related to a person’s involvement in a particular act. By holding up such individual unrepentant Klan members such as Killen as the only “real” villains, we achieve a facile, and ultimately false, closure. Historian Renee C. Romano has argued that these men, when regarded as “‘embarrassing relics of a shameful past’ . . . become almost like displays in a museum case, to be dusted off for their national display in these trials. By emphasizing how far we’ve come since [that era] and how very different these men are from ‘us,’ the trials . . . suggest that the nation has fully reckoned with the racial crimes of the past.”²

This artificial partitioning between then and now becomes more insidious when perpetrators are viewed as representative of a category almost entirely separable from the population at large. As prosecutors consistently painted Killen—and by extension the Klan—as an evil redneck disconnected from the prevailing mainstream in Neshoba County or the white South generally, his trial shed little light on the matrix of involvement, obscuring the Klan’s role in the community, as well as the institutional conditions that fostered its appeal during that time. Legal scholar Martha Minow defines this problem in more general terms: “Justice may call for truth but also demands accountability. And the institutions for securing accountability—notably, trial courts—may impede or ignore truth.”³ But what are the alternatives? How can a more serious consideration of racist elements like

the KKK serve as a vehicle for a more complete conception of justice, focused on engaging with broader truths, facilitating community-level reconciliation, and ensuring that future abuses will not be tolerated?

Any attempt to expand the judicial system's narrow conception of culpability must demand that institutions as well as individuals be accountable. The Klan and other vehicles for organized racial terror did not operate in isolation; they were instead woven into the fabric of Neshoba County and hundreds of other communities. To be sure, holding economic, religious, legal, civic, and other institutions even indirectly accountable for acts of violence is an especially difficult task, given that the very viability of communities is often reliant on the leadership and resources embedded within these bodies.⁴ However, two distinct efforts, separated by nearly forty years and considerable political terrain, demonstrate how an emphasis on institutional factors has both preventive and redemptive potential—providing a means to erode the very conditions that breed contemporary racial conflict, as well as to initiate a move toward reconciliation in communities scarred by historical injustice and oppression. Considered alongside a series of like-minded ongoing initiatives, these institutional approaches may provide a glimpse into the future of our collective reckoning with the racial violence that shadowed the dismantling of the Jim Crow South.

The first of these efforts underscores the preventive capacity of institutions. Its impetus was the 1968 formation of President Johnson's National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, an initiative that became more widely known as the Eisenhower Commission. One of the Commission's primary targets was the Ku Klux Klan, linked at that point to hundreds of acts of racial terror perpetrated by some of its approximately 17,000 dues-paying members. Many self-identified "Klans" were then active—in 1964, the FBI had identified seventeen independent organizations of which the largest by far was the United Klans of America (UKA). Membership in all Klan groups fluctuated constantly, but by the close of 1966 approximately ninety percent of Klan members belonged to the UKA. Among its competitors, only the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, whose membership included Edgar Ray Killen and the other central conspirators in the Freedom Summer murders, built a following that exceeded 250.⁵

The UKA had chapters—known as "klaverns"—in nineteen states, but nowhere did it hold more appeal than in North Carolina. The Klan formed more than two hundred klaverns in the Tar Heel State, whose UKA membership exceeded that of the rest of the South combined. Throughout the mid-1960s, the Klan penetrated many local communities, hosting nightly rallies that attracted hundreds—and sometimes thousands—of sympathizers and curious onlookers. At these events, attendees could enjoy country music, buy food and UKA paraphernalia at concession stands, and pay a ten dollar initiation fee—along with another fifteen dollars for robes—to join the local klavern. Rallies began and ended with a prayer and



The Klan's militant political agenda included acts of intimidation and violence. Although smaller cells—sometimes known as “wrecking crews” or the “white card” membership—carried out the vast majority of its terrorism, even casual adherents condoned such activities and provided a structure within which they could be carried out. Two security guards in the North Carolina Klan, whose duties included maintaining order at rally sites, providing bodyguard protection to Klan leaders, and patrolling rural highways, photographed by Pete Young, courtesy of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

featured a number of speeches by local and state-level Klan officials. The nightly climax was the burning of a wooden cross covered in gasoline-doused burlap. During this well-orchestrated ritual, robed Klansmen would ceremoniously encircle a fiery cross anywhere from thirty to seventy feet high.⁶

This skewed county fair atmosphere suggests the Klan's broader functions and speaks to the layered meanings the group held for its members. In many ways, the UKA served as an alternative society for the disaffected. Beyond rallies, each klavern held weekly meetings, as well as regular social events such as barbecue dinners and turkey shoots. The UKA also sponsored raffles and other funding drives and even offered a group life insurance plan to its membership. Such benevolent activities operated alongside the group's militant political agenda, which included acts of intimidation and outright violence. Although the vast majority of its terrorism was carried out by smaller cells—sometimes known as “wrecking crews” or the “white card” membership—even casual adherents condoned such activities and provided a structure within which they could be carried out.

Pete Young was a North Carolina-based journalist whose first exposure to the UKA had come in 1964, when he was assigned to cover a local rally as part of his work for WRAL, the Raleigh television station then run by Jesse Helms. The rally

had a powerful and surprising effect on Young, who was “shaken . . . by the realization that the drive for minimal justice on behalf of black people had come to this: the ordinary white people of the South . . . on the edge of a collective nervous breakdown composed in roughly equal parts of ignorance, rage, and paranoia.” Feeling that he had “blundered into the scene of an awful disaster,” he returned again and again to Klan sites, ultimately befriending a number of the group’s leaders and members. As his involvement deepened, he began to view improving the lot of those “wounded men, women and children . . . in that . . . Klan cow pasture” as his primary commitment.⁷

The sincerity of that commitment provided Young direct access to the hard-to-reach UKA and attracted the Eisenhower Commission to his work. The Commission tapped Young to serve as a paid consultant to one of its Task Forces. Unlike the theoretical and frequently detached approach taken by the academic luminaries who composed the remainder of the Task Force, Young’s efforts were the product of direct and deep engagement with Klan members. As part of his detailed report to the Commission, he submitted more than a dozen hours of audio material, including recordings of a full UKA rally, interviews with state Klan officers, a UKA-sponsored radio show, and examples of “segregationist” songs played by the unofficial UKA house band Sketter Bob and the Country Pals.⁸

In contrast with the myriad calls to deal with North Carolina’s growing Klan presence through policing and other legal action, Young relentlessly advanced the idea that the Carolina Klan drew much of its strength from the social and economic isolation and declining sense of opportunity many state residents faced. While he viewed Klan members’ “woundedness” as manifested in their world-views—and later would propose that the government undertake “psychiatric evaluation and biographical data collection” studies on citizens living in contexts that breed violence—he importantly understood that their perspectives were fundamentally rooted in the communities where they worked and lived. In 1965, after the Watts Riots focused increasing attention on the problems of the black ghetto, Young formally labeled the under-resourced rural communities that were rapidly becoming Klan hotbeds the “white ghetto.” He saw many parallels between the two, including deficits in the skills, capital, and leadership necessary for successful integration into mainstream economic and political life. He found a crucial, fundamental difference though: the white ghetto seemed to benefit from none of the anti-poverty programs increasingly implemented in northern urban cores.⁹

This lack of government attention meant that there would be no influx of resources to ease the declining opportunities facing many residents of those areas, which then fueled the feelings of anti-government alienation growing more pronounced in eastern North Carolina and many other areas in the rural South. One could find evidence of this sentiment at most UKA rallies, where speeches exploited the sense that the welfare of rural whites was being sacrificed to benefit



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urban blacks. “When they say H . . . E . . . W . . . , they mean *nigger* Health, they mean *nigger* Education, they mean *nigger* Welfare,” bellowed one UKA official to a receptive audience of several hundred eastern North Carolinians in 1968. “You and I are just going to have to suffer it out by ourselves, the best way we can, like we always done.” The UKA was certainly not the only group that framed the anxieties of working-class whites in racially divisive ways during this period. George Wallace’s entire 1968 presidential campaign mobilized discontent by drawing upon similar themes. Young saw that extreme elements in eastern North Carolina and elsewhere harnessed their power by exploiting the social isolation of rural southern communities that lacked the stability and capital provided by durable mainstream institutions.¹⁰

While the Eisenhower Commission provided a forum for airing such ideas, Young became increasingly frustrated that the predominant government reaction to groups like the Klan remained a repressive one. “I was appalled to note that governmental agencies at every level could only counter the challenge of Ku Klux resurgence with police (and police state) measures,” he noted in one of his submissions to the Commission. His point was not that police action was an inappropriate reaction to Klan-perpetrated crimes, but instead that such repressive efforts needed to be paired with some sort of outreach to the aggrieved, alienated citizens that provided the UKA with its steady recruitment base. “No university sociologists studied the White Ghetto world of the Carolina Klan; no churches sent out missionaries; no officials thought about a Klan equivalent of streetcorner youth workers,” argued Young. Instead, officials did “not want to admit that Klan

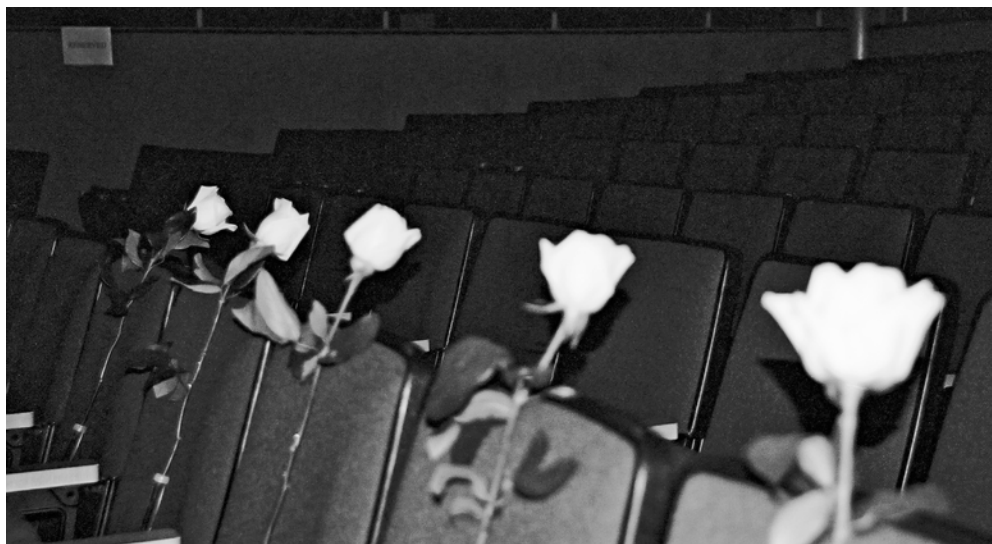
resurgence has its roots in a badly flawed socio-historical environment; they much [preferred the] scapegoat theory that this resurgence stems from the innate evil of the Kluxers themselves.”¹¹

As an alternative, Young partnered with Will Campbell, then the director of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, to undertake a program that would do more than employ police repression to hinder the ability of particular Klan units to operate. The “Ministry to the White Ghetto” was an effort to draw economically marginalized white southerners into mainstream life. The program sought to jump-start the development of indigenous institutions in “white ghetto” communities that could effectively compete with the Klan for the energies of local residents. Rather than focusing on Klan members *per se*, the Ministry would insert a mainstream religious and social presence, thereby directly addressing the underlying grievance structure that provided groups like the Klan with a stream of willing recruits.

Initial proposals for the program described the placement of young ministers and local youths, referred to as “indigenous assistants,” in storefront social centers. These spaces would become vehicles for establishing a “church presence” and would also more generally serve as an informal gathering place for community members. Campbell emphasized that the goal was not to convert residents to civil rights activism, but instead “simply (and humbly) to *be there*,” to provide whatever support was then lacking within the targeted communities. The proposal centered the program in rural eastern North Carolina, proposing an ideal pilot location in Greene County (population 16,741 and shrinking, divided nearly equally between black and white residents, with average family income mired in the bottom fifth of the state).¹²

As a solution to the then-burgeoning Klan problem, the Ministry remains a historical footnote. While Campbell was able to raise some funds for the program, the proposed storefront ministries never materialized. But the strategy is striking for its resonance with contemporary social scientific understandings of why racist organizations thrive in certain places and times. The UKA was a clear example of a reactionary social movement that won support by exploiting the decline of the political, economic, or social standing of particular groups. In this case, Klan recruiters exploited white working class men’s sense of competition for increasingly scarce resources, framing an overall decrease in opportunities as a product of privileges extended to African Americans.¹³

Research has successfully demonstrated that organized racist campaigns emerge where such perceived race-based competition is widespread. The prescriptive potential of this framework has been more controversial. If social, economic, and political isolation breed racial conflict, then social programs that bolster the resources and institutional foundations of otherwise isolated communities can serve as safety valves to reduce inter-group tensions. But by viewing race-based lawless-



On November 3, 1979, Morningside Homes, an African-American neighborhood, was the site of a “Death to the Klan” rally organized by the Communist Workers Party (CWP). At the time, the Klan in North Carolina was in the midst of a minor resurgence, although its following remained only a fraction of membership during its 1960s heyday. Shortly before the start of the Greensboro demonstration, a caravan of cars driven by Klan and Nazi members arrived to confront the marchers. The confrontation quickly escalated into a deadly shootout, in which five CWP demonstrators were killed and eight others wounded. Five roses in Greensboro memorializing the dead, photographed by Kristi Parker.

ness and hate as produced by impoverished environments, such approaches can appear to strip considerations of individual responsibility from offensive and intolerant acts, and thereby to veer toward apologism by avoiding issues of accountability. Will Campbell, who was not averse to arguing that poor whites have, in fact, had their collective “head taken away” by manipulative elites interested in maintaining a racially-divided working class, often did little to dispel this impression.¹⁴

Understanding Klan mobilization as a product of broader community-level environments, however, allows for the possibility of developing policies centered on the institutional vitality of communities and reducing racial conflict through means other than punitive action by police and the legal system. Expanding the prescriptive repertoire beyond judicial action provides another opportunity as well: to envision a more expansive ideal of justice, one that emphasizes accountability while also working to restore the frayed social fabric that limits the ability of many communities to overcome legacies of racial oppression. This was the primary goal of a much more recent initiative in Greensboro, North Carolina. More than a decade after Pete Young emerged with his self-described “shocking” and “explosive” documentation of the activities of the Carolina Klan, this Piedmont city was the site of tragic Klan-related violence to which many now refer simply as the “Greensboro Massacre.”

On November 3, 1979, an African-American neighborhood called Morningside Homes was the site of a “Death to the Klan” rally organized by the Communist Workers Party (CWP). At that time, the Klan in North Carolina was in the midst of a minor resurgence, though its following remained only a fraction of UKA membership during its 1960s heyday. The CWP had been organizing workers in nearby textile mills, and their anti-*KKK* stance was due in part to their perception that the Klan posed a threat to racial cooperation in their trade union efforts. The groups had clashed a few months earlier in the town of China Grove, when CWP members burned a Confederate flag and heatedly traded insults with Klansmen and their allies in the American Nazi Party.

Shortly before the start of the Greensboro demonstration, a caravan of cars driven by Klan and Nazi members arrived to confront the marchers. The confrontation quickly escalated into a deadly shootout, in which five CWP demonstrators were killed and eight others wounded. A single Klan member and an unarmed bystander, a news photographer, were also wounded in the exchange. While both sides had come to the event armed and exhibited aggressive behavior, Klan members had fired the initial shots. All but one of the slain demonstrators, along with the majority of those wounded, had been unarmed. The conflict was complicated by the absence of Greensboro police on the scene, despite the fact that they were charged with monitoring the event and, through the reports of a Klan informant, were aware of the Klan/Nazi contingent’s plans.

Local news crews also filmed the shootings, and the footage clearly showed Klansmen, in the absence of any immediate danger of deadly attack, firing on the crowd of demonstrators, rather than exiting the confrontation. Despite this seemingly damning evidence, two subsequent criminal trials resulted in acquittals. Many who felt these verdicts were unjust criticized the prosecutors’ handling of both trials, though the cases were hindered by a confluence of factors, including since-outlawed juror dismissal guidelines that resulted in the convening of all-white juries. Additionally, CWP members displayed open hostility in the courtroom, in one case refusing to testify and actively disrupting the trial proceedings.

In 1985, a civil trial found the white supremacists and the police jointly liable for one of the killings, resulting in a \$350,000 payment by the City of Greensboro to settle the suit. But this ruling had failed to sway the attitudes of prominent city officials, who refused to acknowledge that the event had any direct connection to their community and its marked race and class divisions. Instead, they continued to stand by the actions of the city’s police department and characterized that day’s violence as a product of a conflict between two outside extremist groups.¹⁵

“I can go for awhile and not think about it, but then every year, when it gets to be that time, there it is,” says Ruth Beasley, who in 1979 was president of the Morningside Homes residents’ council. “We can sweep it under the rug. But with-



In recent years, the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project (GTCRP) has guided efforts to promote alternative strategies to foster dialogue and ultimately reconciliation across various factions of the community. In their mandate to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the GTCRP defined their raison d'être: "There comes a time in the life of every community when it must look humbly and seriously into its past in order to provide the best possible foundation for moving into a future based on healing and hope. Many residents believe that for this city, the time is now." The swearing in ceremony of GTRC commissioners, June 12, 2004, photographed by Lewis A. Brandon III.

out the rhyme or the reason, it'll always come back."¹⁶ Indeed, while Morningside Homes, along with the street corner where the shootings took place, has disappeared—replaced by a new development featuring “neo-traditional” apartments, homes and townhouses—the emotional toll of that day’s violence has not been so easy to cover over.

In recent years, the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project (GTCRP) has guided efforts to promote alternative strategies to foster dialogue and ultimately reconciliation across various factions of the community. In 2003, the GTCRP gave birth to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC). In their mandate to the Commission, GTCRP members defined their *raison d'être*: “There comes a time in the life of every community when it must look humbly and seriously into its past in order to provide the best possible foundation for moving into a future based on healing and hope. Many residents believe that for this city, the time is now.”¹⁷

The GTRC operated within a rich tradition of Truth and Reconciliation Commission work in many areas of the world, including South Africa, Argentina, El Salvador, and East Timor. While the motivation and mandate for such work differs significantly across commissions, the GTRC remains distinct in that it re-

sponded to a particular event rather than a pattern of abuses, and it lacked state or local governmental sponsorship. In Greensboro there were, notably, no offers of legal amnesty for the confession of politically motivated crimes, which had been a controversial component of the South African TRC. But like its predecessors, the GTRC sought, through the testimonies of victims and perpetrators and the analysis of available data, to provide a forum for justice in the form of a contextualized truth that recognized and identified the intersecting roles played by individuals and community institutions. In contrast with the retributive efforts of the legal system, the GTRC pursued restorative justice, providing a structure for those who were harmed to tell their stories and for perpetrators to acknowledge and apologize for their crimes.¹⁸

The GTRC itself consisted of seven commissioners—one white woman, two white men, and four women of color—selected through a democratic community-wide nomination process and charged with the task of examining the “context, causes, sequence and consequence of the events of November 3, 1979.”¹⁹ Despite a lack of official support from the Greensboro City Council—dividing along racial lines, the majority-white Council had voted to oppose the process—in 2005 the Commission convened a set of three public hearings. Fifty-four people—including former residents of Morningside Homes, textile workers, police, labor activists, Klan members, civic leaders, reporters, and a number of academic and legal experts—gave statements. This testimony, combined with a rigorous analysis of additional interviews and archival records from police, government, civic, and media sources, guided the GTRC’s investigation, leading to the release of an extensive final report in May 2006.

Throughout the process, a self-conscious community-mindedness guided the Commission’s work. In an effort to be transparent and inclusive, hearings were open to the public, and community members were encouraged to leave written comments after each session. “TRC Talk,” a half-hour television show, aired twice monthly on Greensboro Community Television. Sixty-four issues of the GTRC newsletter, “Ubuntu Weekly” (the term “ubuntu” was central to South African reconciliation efforts; loosely defined, it conveys the sentiment “I am what I am because of who we all are”), were sent out to all interested parties, and the Commission also hosted a Web site and blog. An outreach effort identified nearly seventy “Report Receivers”—groups that would pledge to read, assess, and engage in dialogue about the final report. Additionally, the GTRC sponsored a series of events to support the Commission, including an interfaith reflection service, a prayer breakfast, and worship services prior to each of the three public hearings.

Despite these efforts, skepticism and opposition from segments of the community hindered the GTRC’s work. A number of key voices were absent from the hearings, as many city officials, police officers, and business leaders refused to testify publicly. Not surprisingly, Klan and Nazi adherents tended to be suspi-

cious of the Commission's work, though several did ultimately testify or contribute private statements. Greensboro Mayor Keith Holliday was a consistent critic of the process, arguing that "harm can come from an inaccurate truth leading to inaccurate accountability, non-forgiveness and especially non-reconciliation" and characterizing the Commission's efforts as amounting to a "guilt trip put on our 235,000 citizens who are not responsible for Nov. 3, 1979."²⁰

In the face of such criticism, what has the GTRC accomplished? Most fundamentally, the Commission's very process has created a touchstone for serious dialogue about the events of November 3, 1979. Historian Timothy Tyson validated the Commission's creation of a tangible written record of its findings, emphasizing that its report has the power to act as a "common place" for the community to honestly confront its past. His own recent book, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, centered on a racially motivated murder in nearby Oxford, North Carolina, and had served a similar function. "In Oxford, thousands of people have read this book—I've been shocked and amazed at what has happened," Tyson explained. "I'm not going to say multiracial utopia has descended . . . but people have gotten together to talk about this." Commissioner Barbara Walker likewise argued that the open public nature of the GTRC's hearings itself laid a foundation for understanding and reconciliation, something that Minow has referred to more generally as "the restorative power of truth-telling." Noting that, in several cases, those testifying had never before had an opportunity to express what the events of November 3 had meant to them, Walker suggested that "just providing the place for them to be heard we hope will provide some measure of healing."²¹

And while some in the community continued to express concerns that no new evidence or insight would emerge from the GTRC process, testimony brought to light new perspectives and placed longstanding views in better context. Several key players in the 1979 events offered self-critical reassessments of their actions. Perhaps most significantly, the polarizing CWP leader Nelson Johnson offered apologies to then-mayor Jim Melvin and to Klan and Nazi members for his use of language intended to demean and dehumanize them. Later, Johnson recanted his long-expressed belief that Guilford County prosecutor Mike Schlosser intentionally lost the 1980 state criminal trial, which had resulted in the acquittals of six Klan and Nazi members. This acknowledgement followed his reading of Schlosser's statement to the Commission, where he learned of the extent to which the prosecution's case was impeded by various procedural issues and a lack of cooperation from federal agencies.²²

Ramon Bell, a retired Greensboro police officer, also clarified for the first time the administrative decisions that led to an absence of police on the scene when the shootings occurred. While others had argued that police presence was hindered by the fact that the marchers had unexpectedly changed their route, Bell confirmed that the starting time and location of the march had in fact been given to officers



The GTRC operated within a rich tradition of Truth and Reconciliation Commission work in many areas of the world, including South Africa, Argentina, El Salvador, and East Timor. While the motivation and mandate for such work differs significantly across commissions, the GTRC remains distinct in that it responded to a particular event rather than a pattern of abuses, and it lacked state or local governmental sponsorship. GTRC participants with Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa (front row, second from left), November 3, 2005, photographed by Laura Seel.

in advance. The fact that officers were stationed nearly a half-mile away when the Klan arrived on the scene was instead the product of an explicit “low-profile” strategy ostensibly intended to defuse tensions likely to arise given the involvement of groups who had shown hostility toward the police in the past. Bell discussed in detail the “administrative operational plan” that laid out this strategy, as well as how that plan severely limited officers’ ability to react to events in process. In so doing, he helped to untangle the complex chain of events that contributed to that day’s tragic outcome.

Other testimony served to place the event in temporal context, revealing the extent to which its fallout extended well beyond 1979. CWP members Nelson Johnson, Signe Waller, and Willena Cannon each recounted how they faced job discrimination, police surveillance, and other hardships for years following the shootings. “To say this event is a piece of the past is a crime against the survivors,” said a child of another member. “This is a lived experience for a number of people.”

Perhaps most significantly, the GTRC’s emphasis on achieving a contextualized truth meant that it would engage seriously with the crucial question of where responsibility lay for the violence of November 3. In this respect, the Commis-

sion's work was in marked contrast to Edgar Ray Killen's criminal trial, which took place during the summer of 2005 while the GTRC prepared to hold its first public hearing. While Killen's conviction corrected the grievous error of allowing the Freedom Summer murders to go unpunished, the very effort to show that he was responsible for these crimes also competed with any attempt to examine the complicity of those who may not have fired fatal shots but whose involvement in some way allowed the crimes to occur. As South African lawyer Paul van Zyl put it: "Trials have limited explanatory value. They're about individual culpability, not about the system as a whole. Trials set up an 'us versus them' dynamic. A trial is not about *our* complicity. It makes it look like *they're* guilty, not us."²³

Trial proceedings, however, do provide a window into the broad scope of individual suffering that has resulted from past oppression. Andrew Sheldon, a veteran jury consultant who has worked with prosecutors in the Killen trial and several other Civil Rights "cold cases," has spoken of the many stories that emerge through the jury selection process—of children courageously confronting their Klan-affiliated fathers, of the wrenching emotional costs of losing friends or family to racially motivated violence, and of the pain and rage produced when powerful whites responded to expressions of dignity by African Americans with acts of brutal repression. But the very nature of the courtroom marginalizes stories that do not speak directly to a defendant's guilt or innocence and fails to provide space to validate such expressions through further dialogue or demands for institutional accountability.²⁴

The attendant emphasis on individual retribution in the Killen case has provided no clear path for further community-level engagement with the conditions that gave rise to the Freedom Summer murders. Throughout the trial itself, Killen's role in the murders was presented as a set of discrete acts, decontextualized from the broader arc of the Civil Rights struggle and racial inequity in Neshoba County. Even within the Philadelphia Coalition, the local group whose call for justice in 2004 provided an important spark to the efforts to reopen the case, there has been serious disagreement about how (or whether) to proceed, as those who view the trial as a way to close the book on the community's painful past have resisted efforts to use Killen's conviction as a foundation for future educational initiatives.²⁵

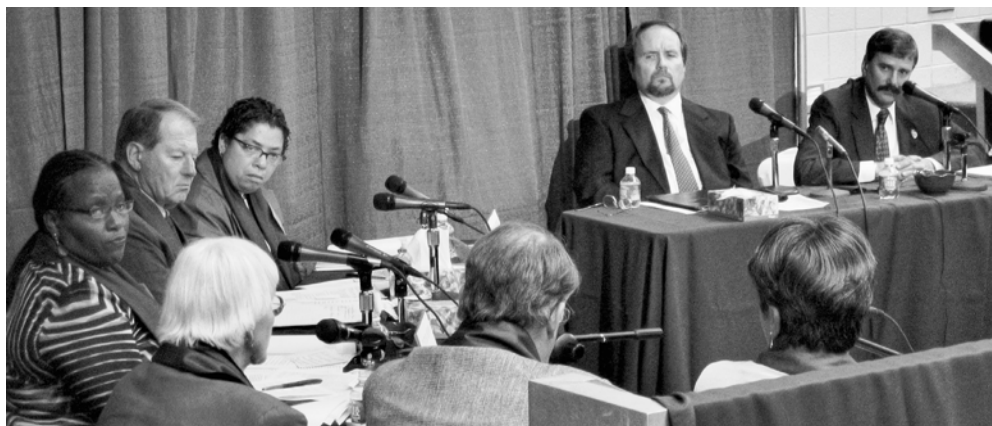
Will Campbell, whose work has bridged Pete Young's 1960's "white ghetto" outreach and Greensboro's ongoing reconciliation efforts, has also highlighted the limits of strategies that fail to account for the institutional and community-level dimensions of racial violence. In his recent communication with the Greensboro Commission, Campbell emphasized that, in his view, its mission was not "to pass judgment on a few by calling them code words (Klan . . . Nazi) but to help us all to understand how and why these groups were formed in the first place. I.E., we were 'ALL' guilty of the killings." The GTRC, for its part, self-consciously

contrasted its efforts with the recent Freedom Summer trial, acknowledging that Killen's successful prosecution was an "important event," but also criticizing the justice system for its separation of the "individual from the community in which both perpetrators and victims live."²⁶

Neither Campbell nor the Commission, however, was interested in uncritically emphasizing the complicity of the broader community. If the community as a whole is pronounced guilty, then no particular individuals or groups are held accountable for their decisions or actions. The GTRC's process, in contrast, took care to recognize the "wide range of stakeholders harmed by the events of Nov. 3, 1979," and the ways in which the actions of various parties produced those harms. Its report included recommendations that harm be acknowledged in a way that both makes restitution and prevents similar future abuses from occurring. This alternative route to establishing culpability is especially crucial when, as in Greensboro, conventional criminal trials have resulted in a "disconnect between what seems to be a common sense assessment of wrongdoing and the [trials'] verdicts."²⁷

The GTRC ultimately found members of the Klan/Nazi contingent responsible for intentionally provoking a violent conflict and firing at demonstrators instead of retreating when a "path of exit was cleared." To a significantly lesser degree, it faulted CWP demonstrators for contributing to the contentious climate through their rhetoric, and for exposing locals to undue risk by not adequately involving Morningside Homes residents in demonstration planning. It criticized federal law enforcement agents for not sharing their intelligence about the violent plans of the Klan/Nazi caravan, but reserved its harshest judgment for the Greensboro Police Department. The report concluded that "the single most important element that contributed to the violent outcome of the confrontation was the absence of police," and went on to list a number of particular problematic decisions by officers and higher-level administrators, made in the context of their overall "stunning lack of curiosity in planning for the safety of the event."²⁸

But while the fact that the GTRC report represents the most fully-realized account of the "context, causes, sequence and consequence" of the events of November 3 enhances the credibility of such conclusions, its release was not intended to be the final word, but rather a foundation for continued dialogue. As such, the path to any sort of durable reconciliation likely will be long and uneven. At this point, while debates about the appropriateness of the GTRC process have highlighted, rather than eroded, longstanding community divisions over the events of November 3rd and their relevance to Greensboro today, other signs are more encouraging. To date, nearly a dozen college and university courses have focused on the GTRC and its Final Report, and a student-led consortium from eight campuses held a conference in April 2007 dealing with "action steps" related to the Commission's findings. Another student group is working to develop a grade



The GTRC itself consisted of seven commissioners selected through a democratic community-wide nomination process and charged with the task of examining the “context, causes, sequence and consequence of the events of November 3, 1979.” Despite the majority-white Greensboro City Council’s vote to oppose the process, the Commission convened a set of three public hearings in 2005. Fifty-four people—including former residents of Morningside Homes, textile workers, police, labor activists, Klan members, civic leaders, reporters, and a number of academic and legal experts—gave statements. Commissioners questioning police officers, photographed by Lewis A. Brandon III.

school curriculum focused on November 3 and Civil Rights education generally. The Greensboro Public Library and the GTCRP jointly hosted a series of four town hall-style meetings on the GTRC report. After the report’s release, Mayor Holliday began to back away from his pronounced criticism, commending the Commission for its “neutrality and professionalism” and indicating a willingness to meet with its members to discuss next steps. Perhaps the most significant signal of progress, however, occurred in November 2007, when Greensboro residents elected Yvonne Johnson, a longtime supporter of the GTRC, as the city’s first African-American mayor.²⁹

At the grassroots level, a set of former Morningside Homes residents who have long blamed the CWP for bringing violence into their community have, through the Commission’s work, gained a better understanding of the group’s motives that day, and have requested a meeting with Nelson Johnson to begin a dialogue. Several small community discussion groups have also formed to read and discuss the GTRC report. And grassroots organizations in several communities in Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Michigan have closely observed the process in Greensboro to assess whether to undertake similar local efforts.

Finally, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process also provides a space for the evaluation of the sorts of social scientific claims advanced by Pete Young in his work on the Civil Rights-era UKA. In its final report, the GTRC was clear that the justice toward which it “aspires in its search for the truth” comes “not only from trials, but from addressing the root causes of injustices that often lead

to violence that rips apart communities.” As we have seen, the Commission’s findings do not avoid judgments of responsibility or the accountability of various individual and organizational actors for the events of November 3. Indeed, they include calls for reform to reduce pervasive institutional inequities, ranging from the establishment of a living wage to increased funding to agencies serving low-income residents to leadership training provided by the City of Greensboro to local residents. Importantly, these recommendations acknowledge that inequalities and conflict are produced by practices that cut across racial and class lines in complex ways. Successful social justice policies, they argue, involve fostering understanding across groups and eradicating institutional racial disparities, but also attacking the root causes of inter-group animosity and conflict, thus defusing the class-based grievances that groups like the Klan exploit to mobilize followers. By holding both individual and institutional actors to account, initiatives such as the GTRC open communities to an ideal of justice that values redemption as well as retribution.³⁰

In March 2006, the University of Mississippi’s William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation hosted a “Regional Summit on Racial Violence and Reconciliation.” Representatives of over two-dozen organizations devoted to responding to the legacy of racial violence in the U.S. attended the three-day conference. Attendees debated and extended the themes of justice and truth that have recently played out in Mississippi and North Carolina and ultimately pledged to coordinate their efforts through the establishment of a regional umbrella organization, the Alliance for Truth and Racial Reconciliation (ATTR). Several participants, most notably Civil Rights Movement veteran Lawrence Guyot, emphatically called for justice in the form of additional prosecutions in Civil Rights cold cases. The passage of the John Lewis-sponsored “Till Bill,” which would allocate one hundred million dollars over the next decade for the FBI to pursue investigations of Civil Rights-era crimes, would significantly bolster such efforts. But conversation also repeatedly emphasized extra-legal community responses to past and current racism. In part, the diversification of reconciliation efforts stems from a recognition of the closing window on trials for Civil Rights-era crimes as suspects and witnesses age and die—a window that has, of course, already closed in hundreds of other cases. But the wide range of ongoing efforts is also a product of the desire for a more complete community response to racist acts, for truth, and ultimately reconciliation, as well as retributive justice. In its pursuit of the latter, the legal system has proven to be ineffective at untangling and acknowledging broader community forces that produce individual acts of racial violence. By zeroing in on discrete historical events, trials also tend to decouple past instances of racial violence from the present day, obscuring institutional forces that continue to reproduce racial and class-based inequalities.

The GTRC has operated alongside a range of like-minded initiatives. The 1898



The Commission's process created a touchstone for serious dialogue about the events of November 3, 1979. Commissioner Barbara Walker argued that the open and public nature of the GTRC's hearings laid a foundation for understanding and reconciliation. Noting that in several cases those testifying had never before had an opportunity to express what the events of November 3 had meant to them, Walker suggested that "just providing the place for them to be heard we hope will provide some measure of healing." Watercolor painting by Aliene Howell.

Wilmington Race Riot Commission has compiled an exhaustive report detailing how a mob of white vigilantes took Wilmington, North Carolina, by force, killing or exiling well over a thousand members of the local black community. Residents in Duluth, Minnesota, have erected a memorial commemorating the 1920 lynching of three black men. In Walton County, Georgia, members of the Moore's Ford Committee staged a dramatic reenactment of a 1946 lynching. The Coalition to Remember the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot hosted a series of centennial remembrances, encouraging participants to use knowledge of that tragic event to build a more inclusive community today.

With all of this work, the focus on past events is intended in part as a vehicle to spark conversations about and reconsiderations of contemporary forms of injustice in our local communities. A logical product of such dialogue is a renewed commitment to programs and policies designed to eradicate the institutional conditions that lead to competition and conflict. For Pete Young in the 1960s, understanding Klan-perpetrated Civil Rights violence required comprehending the Klan itself—how it deeply penetrated many communities and existed in concert with larger institutional efforts that maintained white dominance. Our challenge today is to engage the social forces that produce individual and organized acts of racism. Indeed, the power of contextualized truth is rooted in its ability to resist false distinctions between individual and community, and past and present.

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1. Dennis and Chaney have made similar remarks in a variety of media accounts. For examples, see the transcript of Dennis's interview with Tavis Smiley, http://www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley/archive/200506/20050622_transcript.html (accessed 4 January 2007) and Chaney's interview with the online publication *Education Update*, <http://www.educationupdate.com/archives/2006/Feb/html/cov-murderedbutstill.htm> (accessed 4 January 2007). The term "matrix of involvement" was invoked by a number of participants in the conference session "Is a Verdict Enough? Reflections on Justice and Reconciliation in the Killen Trial," *Southern Exposure: A Regional Summit on Racial Violence and Reconciliation*, Oxford, Mississippi, 18 March 2006.

2. Renee C. Romano, "Narratives of Redemption: The Birmingham Church Bombing Trials and the Construction of Civil Rights Memory," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 121.

3. Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), 9.

4. Sherrilyn A. Ifill, *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-First Century* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007), 156.

5. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, *The Present Day Ku Klux Klan Movement*, 90th Congress, First Session (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 60–62. These groups often battled over adherents, with the White Knights and UKA in Mississippi sometimes recruiting en bloc entire klaverns away from the other organization.

6. For Klan membership figures, see U.S. House of Representatives, *The Present Day Ku Klux Klan Movement*. Rally description comes from personal interviews with Pete Young (5 February 2004) and George Dorsett (20 February 2005), as well as information included in the papers of Governor Dan Moore, General Correspondence, 1966, Box 150, State Highway Patrol files (Raleigh: North Carolina State Archives); and "Task Force Report Appendix C," Federal Records—Eisenhower Commission (RG 283), Task Force I—Assassination, Series 10, Box 1, LBJ Library (1969).

7. Pete Young, *Task Force Report, Chapter 4*, Federal Records—Eisenhower Commission, Task Force I, Series 10, Box 1, LBJ Library (1969), 354.

8. This recorded material is housed at the LBJ Library, under Federal Records—Eisenhower Commission (RG 283), Task Force I—Assassination, Series 13.

9. Pete Young, "The First Angry Men," Federal Records—Eisenhower Commission, Task Force I, Series 12, Box 5, LBJ Library (1968).

10. Interview with Pete Young, 5 February 2004; Pete Young, "White and Black Ghettos: Similarities and Differences," Federal Records—Eisenhower Commission, Task Force I, Series 10, Box 1, LBJ Library; Audio Recording, Federal Records—Eisenhower Commission, Task Force I, Series 13, Tape 3, LBJ Library; Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

11. Pete Young, "The Gun and the Guitar" and "Image Problems," Federal Records—Eisenhower Commission, Task Force I, Series 12, Box 5, LBJ Library (1968).

12. Will Campbell to Bob Stone, 25 February 1966, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, M341, Box 50, Folder 2.

13. E. M. Beck, "Guess Who's Coming to Town: White Supremacy, Ethnic Competition, and Social Change," *Sociological Focus* 33, no. 2 (2000): 153–174; Susan Olzak, *The Dynamics of Ethnic Com-*

petition and Conflict (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Nella Van Dyke and Sarah A. Soule, "Structural Social Change and the Mobilizing Effect of Threat: Explaining Levels of Patriot and Militia Organizing in the United States," *Social Problems* 49, no. 4 (2002): 497–520.

14. Will Campbell, "Used and Abused: The Redneck's Lot," in *The Prevailing South: Life and Politics in a Changing Culture*, ed. Dudley Clendinen (Atlanta, GA: Longstreet Press, 1988), 94.

15. The basic chronology of November 3, 1979, is described in detail in Elizabeth Wheaton, *Codename Greenkil: The 1979 Greensboro Killings* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), and the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter GTRC) *Final Report*, Ch. 7, available at: http://www.greensborotrc.org/1979_sequence.pdf (accessed 9 July 2006).

16. Quoted in Lorraine Ahearn, "Nov. 3, 1979: Time to Wade in the Water," *Greensboro News & Record*, March 20, 2005.

17. GTRC, *Seeking Truth, Working for Reconciliation* (2004), 5.

18. Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

19. As part of the selection process, the GTCRP requested that seventeen groups, representing a wide swath of Greensboro interests, nominate a representative to the selection committee. Fourteen ultimately did so, and these representatives selected seven commissioners from a pool of sixty-seven candidates collected through a general call. See GTRC, *Final Report: Executive Summary*, 2, available at: http://www.greensborotrc.org/exec_summary.pdf (accessed 9 July 2006).

20. Jordan Green, "City Council splits along racial lines over truth process," *Yes! Weekly* (27 April–3 May 2005), 7–8; *Greensboro News & Record*, 21 April 2005, A5.

21. Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 66; Amy Kingsley, "Speakers point the way forward for truth process," *Yes! Weekly* (5–11 October 2005), 6–9.

22. Jordan Green, "'Low-profile' plan reason for police absence during 1979 killings," *Yes! Weekly* (31 August–6 September 2005), 6–9.

23. Quoted in Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 101; emphasis in original.

24. Andrew Sheldon, email message to the Alliance for Truth and Racial Reconciliation, 17 June 2007.

25. Author interviews with Stanley Dearman, Philadelphia, Mississippi, 9 January 2006; and James E. Prince III, Philadelphia, Mississippi, 10 January 2006.

26. Will Campbell to GTCRP Local Task Force member Eileen Curry, <http://gtrc.blogspot.com/2006/02/will-campbells-reflections-on-gtrc.html> (accessed 3 December 2006); GTRC, *Final Report*, 14; GTRC, *Final Report: Executive Summary*, 28. Both available at: <http://www.greensborotrc.org> (accessed 9 July 2006).

27. GTRC, *Final Report: Executive Summary*, 16.

28. Ibid, 6–8; The GTRC report qualifies their measured criticism of federal agents, noting that relevant agencies failed to provide documents necessary to fully evaluate their role. See: GTRC, *Final Report*, 116.

29. Edward Cone, "Council members reflect on Truth hearings," *Greensboro News & Record*, 9 October 2005, H3; Author interview with Jill Williams, Greensboro, North Carolina, 15 November 2006.

30. GTRC, *Final Report*, 21; GTRC, *Final Report: Executive Summary*, 31–36; Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 82–3, similarly notes that proposing viable means to reduce the material subjugation of victimized parties is essential to the success of a TRC's mission generally.