

Democratic Narrative,  
History, and Memory

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EDITED BY

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AND

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## Preface

CAROLE A. BARBATO AND LAURA L. DAVIS

On May 4, 1970, an international spotlight focused on Kent State University after a student protest against the Vietnam War and the presence of the Ohio National Guard on campus ended in tragedy. Twenty-eight guardsmen fired sixty-seven shots in thirteen seconds. They killed Kent State students Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer, and William Schroeder and wounded nine other students, permanently paralyzing Dean Kahler.

The demonstration at Kent State marked a climax of the student activism and protest of the 1960s, a historical period encompassing the shootings at Kent State. The student protest movement was rooted in the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>1</sup> On college campuses, the generation gap—the divide between generations in lifestyle, culture, politics, and values—of the 1960s also was strongly felt. Those in positions of authority—parents, campus administrators, politicians, and law enforcement officials—squarely lined up on one side of the divide, with rising numbers of students on the other.

On May 4, the Ohio National Guard, called into town by Kent's mayor, literally lined up on campus on one side of the grassy central area known as the Commons. Students gathered five hundred feet away at the campus Victory Bell. Most students were observers; many felt aligned with the general counterculture movement; some were campus activists. Many students were consciously exercising their First Amendment rights of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech as they gathered for the May 4 rally.

In a statement read by press secretary Ron Ziegler, President Richard Nixon responded to the shootings by commenting, "This should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy," an assertion of authoritarian values seen by many as lacking in sympathy.<sup>2</sup> For a large proportion of Americans,

56, no 3 (1997): 345–52; Roy, *Bitters in the Honey*. For information on miscegenation, see Godfrey, “Sweet little girls?,” Jacoway, interview by author; Roy, *Bitters in the Honey*.

## *Confronting the Legacies of Violence*

Lessons from Kent State and Greensboro, North Carolina

RENEE ROMANO

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.

—Mandate, Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Shots ring out as a group of heavily armed men opens fire on unarmed, peaceful protesters gathered for a demonstration. Several fall, mortally wounded; more are injured, some very seriously. Afterward, those in positions of authority and many in the larger community blame the protesters: it was their fault for making trouble; they were outside agitators seeking to foment revolution; they were Communists and deserved to die. Demonstrators and their supporters blame the killings on governing authorities, who, they charge, either ordered the killings or helped create an environment that encouraged and fostered violence and the excessive use of force. And, despite the existence of reams of evidence about the shootings, victims prove unable to secure justice through the legal system.

This scenario, in its basic outline, has a pattern that many survivors might recognize as their own, including those in the Kent State community. There, on May 4, 1970, members of the National Guard opened fire on students protesting the Vietnam War, killing four and wounding another nine. Yet while the description might resonate for many at Kent State, it specifically describes shootings that took place in Greensboro, North Carolina, on November 3, 1979, when a group of labor and civil rights activists calling themselves the Communist Workers Party (CWP) led a march to protest the Ku Klux Klan. When the protesters gathered at a black housing project in Greensboro

to begin their march, a nine-car caravan of Klansmen and members of the American Nazi Party arrived on the scene. As four different television news crews shot video, Klansmen and neo-Nazis took guns from their cars and opened fire on the crowd, which included many children from the project among the demonstrators. Four of the CWP leaders were killed, and another ten people were injured.<sup>1</sup>

The 1970 shootings at Kent State are sometimes viewed as a singular event in American history. Philip Caputo, the famed writer who was a young reporter at the time of the Kent State shootings, describes the massacre as a "unique event . . . the first and only time American troops fired upon and killed American students."<sup>2</sup> Searching for a parallel, Caputo could find only the Boston Massacre of 1775, where British troops shot and killed American colonists. But those seeking parallels do not need to look as far back as the colonial era, nor need they ignore events that have taken place since the Kent State shootings. In Greensboro, as at Kent State, unarmed protesters faced a short but intense period of horrific violence initiated by a well-armed group.<sup>3</sup> Despite the one-sided nature of the violence, the media in Kent and in Greensboro held the protesters responsible for what happened. And perhaps most significantly, although the violence in each place only lasted seconds, it left a raw wound in both communities that has festered for decades. While many years have elapsed since these stark moments of violence, they remain present in the memory of many who were there and of others who heard about them at the time or since.

In both Kent and Greensboro, the ruptures that originally led to violence have continued in the form of debates and differences about what actually happened on those fateful days. History, these two episodes make clear, can become contested terrain in the face of politicized violence. At both sites, even some of the most basic facts of what happened have been debated for years. But when history itself becomes a field of contest, when there is no consensus about what happened or why, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to put a violent past to rest. The episodes at Kent State and in Greensboro have remained raw because the shootings have remained the subject of continued controversy, unanswered questions, and charges of conspiracy and cover-ups. Moreover, steps taken in both communities to try to rectify the violence demonstrate the limitations of common mechanisms of social repair—specifically the legal system—to bring divided communities back together or to settle disagreements in the historical record. For both the Kent State and Greensboro communities, the criminal justice system proved an inadequate mechanism for holding accountable those responsible for violence, for fostering community reconciliation and healing, or for establishing the historical record.

Yet the case of Greensboro provides not only a powerful parallel to Kent, but also an instructive comparison. For in Greensboro, the community has taken steps to grapple with its contested history by turning to a model popular outside the United

States, a truth and reconciliation commission. Greensboro's experience suggests that before communities can hope to find meaningful ways to move on from historic violence, they must first find mechanisms to establish some basic truths about the event. Assessing divergent historical accounts is a first step toward resolving longstanding social divisions.

In the introduction to a 1982 anthology on the shootings at Kent State, Scott Bills noted that at Kent State, "as with other sudden, violent historical events, the past lives uneasily in the present."<sup>4</sup> In Kent, as well as in Greensboro, the past continues to live in the present. But why? Why have these violent episodes remained so powerfully salient for more than three decades? These two events offer some clues about the kinds of violence that can prove difficult to resolve or move beyond. First, at both Kent State and Greensboro, a well-armed force used excessive violence to quell a nonviolent political protest. These shootings were not random acts of violence. In Kent, Ohio National Guard troops ordered to the campus to suppress antiwar protests opened fire two days later as students participated in a rally on the campus Commons. In Greensboro, Klansmen targeted the Communist Workers Party activists because the group advocated trade unionism, worker's rights, and interracial cooperation. These two incidents resulted from and reflected deep political divides.<sup>5</sup>

In both episodes, moreover, the violence was compounded by the fact that it was so popular. In both cases, many people felt the shootings were justified and that the protesters had gotten what they deserved. In a Gallup poll from May 1970, 58 percent of those polled believed that the demonstrators at Kent State bore the primary responsibility for the students' deaths. Only 11 percent held the National Guard responsible.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, some in the community openly questioned why the Guard didn't shoot more students. An FBI memo from the time insisted, "The students invited [the shooting] and got what they deserved."<sup>7</sup> The antipathy to the protesters was so widespread that it did not seem to matter that two of the four students killed at Kent had not been involved in the demonstrations at the time of the shooting.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, in Greensboro, the unpopularity of the Communist Workers Party made it easy for the larger community to blame the demonstrators and to excuse the Klan's violence. Influenced by the media, many people in Greensboro came to blame the CWP for instigating the violence with their anti-Klan rhetoric and for fomenting communism and social revolution.<sup>9</sup> Even the presence of many children at the housing project where the Klan opened fire did not shift sympathy to the demonstrators. No one who was there, it seems, could be truly innocent.

But it is not just the political nature of the excessive force, or its popularity, that has led the past to live uneasily in the present in Kent and in Greensboro. The two communities share another key characteristic: in both, the truth of what happened has been hotly debated and contested since the shootings took place. Signe Waller,

a CWP member whose husband was killed on November 3, has called Greensboro a “city with two tales.”<sup>10</sup> The same could be said of Kent, since in each city, two very different histories of what happened and who was responsible for the violence have developed.

In Greensboro, the media, political authorities, and many in the larger community have put forth a history of the events that insists that the shooting had nothing to do with Greensboro or its race or class relations. This interpretation depicts both the Klan and the Communists as radical outsider groups who chose, for whatever reason, to have their showdown in Greensboro.<sup>11</sup> In this version of the incident, the city and the police bear no responsibility for what happened, even though the CWP had left a map of the march route with the police and the police knew the Klan and Nazis were planning to confront the march and were bringing firearms. Yet city officials did not blame police for not being at the scene at the time of the shooting. The chief of police’s official report on the incident found that the police planning and preparation were “adequate and proper” that the assigned personnel level was “sufficient,” and that the police performed their duties “in a professional and reasonable manner.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the local media, as well as the official reports, pinned much of the blame for the November 3 shootings on the demonstrators, even though Klan and Nazi members carried out nearly all of the shooting and all of the killed or wounded were CWP members or sympathizers. The local media quickly labeled the event a “shootout,” insisting that the CWP had sought a confrontation and that both sides had been equally responsible for the gunfire.<sup>13</sup> This rhetorical shift—from *massacre* to *shootout*—came to dominate the general view of the event in Greensboro. A 1980 official report by the Greensboro Human Relations Commission maintained that the CWP “took on the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis in a shootout at Morningside Homes, that left five people dead.”<sup>14</sup>

For survivors of November 3, the truth of this event is completely different. To them, the shooting *was* a massacre, one that reflected long-standing, corrupt racist and class politics in Greensboro. The police, they insisted, knew what was going to happen at the march and deliberately decided not to protect the Communists or the poor blacks who lived in the housing project where the march began. Indeed, some CWP survivors claim that the local, state, and federal governments used the Klan to silence the Communists and to forestall their interracial organizing. In this view, the killings were nothing less than state-sponsored political assassinations, the work of “an organized death squad that rained death and terror on a poor, minority neighborhood.” Many of the survivors began a crusade after the shooting to prove that the police and city officials were complicit in the violence of November 3 and that the episode was part of a long-standing pattern in Greensboro of repression of racial and class activism.<sup>15</sup>

Kent, like Greensboro, is a city with two tales. In Kent, the story that the guards-

men and their supporters tell portrays the student demonstrators as radicals and suggests that they may have been associated with terrorist groups such as the Weathermen. In this view, the students are seen as dangerous: guardsmen claim that they felt threatened by students who were throwing rocks and by what they thought was a sniper, and that they fired in self-defense. In this version of events, the shootings took place because of confusion and fear: they were not planned or organized and certainly were not part of any larger conspiracy.<sup>16</sup>

For victims of the May 4 shootings at Kent State and for many others who were there, though, there is no question that the shootings were unjustified and premeditated. Victims and their supporters insist that the guardsmen never faced any danger from the students; the students who were shot were too far away to have been threatening to the Guard, and some were shot in the back. All available data, including photos, confirm that a line of more than seventy guardsmen turned in unison and that twenty-eight opened fire, providing clear evidence of planning. Many believe that a superior officer ordered the guardsmen to fire, although the identity of that officer remains unknown. Victims and supporters also continue to raise questions about the burning of the Kent State ROTC building, which took place two days before the shootings, theorizing that it was the work of a government agent or undercover program seeking to stir up trouble or to justify harsh measures to control the student demonstrators.<sup>17</sup>

The divergent histories in Greensboro and in Kent have developed and survived despite a plethora of evidence about the shootings, in both cases, photographs and audio recordings of the shootings exist and have been exhaustively analyzed. There are videos of the shootings in Greensboro and an eight-millimeter film of the shootings at Kent State. Dubious claims about both events, circulated and popularized by the media, have survived despite contradictory evidence. In both Kent and Greensboro, the shooters’ explanations that they were acting in self-defense gained widespread currency despite the lack of evidence that the shooters were in any real danger when they opened fire. These divergent accounts of the same historical events demonstrate the importance of what some scholars of historical memory refer to as *frames of remembrance*. How individuals or groups remember and understand an event can be influenced more by their political beliefs, social position, or preconceived notions of what happened than by facts or evidence. A general public predisposed to view public demonstrations as potentially dangerous threats to the status quo may easily accept a media account that paints nonviolent demonstrators as radicals or potential terrorists. As memory theorist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka points out, when individuals develop their sense of the past, their own experience, political views, and emotional needs become the key frame of reference for constructing a sense of history. Although the historical record is not a free-for-all that can be remade completely in contradiction to available evidence, studies of

historical memory make clear that there is a great deal of space for individuals and groups to construct particular versions of the past that meet their contemporary political and cultural needs.<sup>18</sup>

These versions of history, moreover, can have important political consequences. As Michael Kammen suggests in his influential work *Mythic Chords of Memory*, the truth of the past is less important than the constructed memory of the past—often influenced by political figures and the media—that people carry with them. “What people believe to be true about their past is usually more important in determining their behavior and responses than truth itself,” Kammen observes.<sup>19</sup> The vital importance of understandings of the past in shaping political behavior and cultural identity has ensured that the victims in these shootings have developed a strong alternative memory that seeks to keep alive their version of events. Activists both in Greensboro and at Kent State have engaged in various forms of “memory work,” as they have sought to influence the collective understandings of what happened in each episode. This memory work has included writing books and giving interviews, planning commemorative ceremonies, proposing or building monuments to the shooting victims, researching charges of conspiracy, and holding meetings or symposia about the events.<sup>20</sup> In these ways, victims and their allies have sought to keep their version of the past alive and to challenge dominant framings that discount their reality of the events.

This ongoing contestation over the history and meaning of the two shootings makes both Kent and Greensboro classic examples of pasts that will not “lie down quietly,” in the words of Desmond Tutu, the South African archbishop.<sup>21</sup> While Tutu’s words referred specifically to his country’s history of apartheid, a more general pattern holds true: violent incidents that are historically and politically contested, or where one group’s reality of events is discounted and ignored, cannot be easily put in the past. As one newspaper noted ten years after the shooting, the Kent State incident refused to “stay quiet in its grave.”<sup>22</sup> These pasts remain, in the words of religious scholar Solomon Schimmel, “wounds not healed by time.”<sup>23</sup> The events in Kent and in Greensboro have proven particularly resistant to closure. The social and communal rifts engendered by the shootings in these two communities have not, and will not, go away on their own.

What mechanisms exist for grappling with or trying to resolve the kind of violence that took place at Kent State and in Greensboro? Can pasts that will not lie down quietly and that result in opposing versions of history be reconciled? Kent State and Greensboro make one thing clear: the courtroom is not an ideal space for grappling with a contested past. The criminal justice system provides perhaps the most popular and widely accepted form of justice seeking in the United States. Many victims of violence and their supporters immediately turn to the law and the legal process as a way to punish perpetrators and to hold instigators of violence responsible for their actions. If legal justice is thwarted at the time of the crime,

victims or their families may spend decades struggling to bring alleged murderers before a jury.<sup>24</sup> Yet this most traditional method of trying to fix blame and ensure accountability is particularly limited in cases of violence leading to contested historical records. Even the briefest accounting of efforts by victims of Kent and Greensboro to find justice through the courts offers a sad illustration of the failings of the legal system to handle episodes of this kind of politicized violence. As victims in both cities discovered, the legal system “inevitably reflects and also is influenced by the prevailing social and political contexts.”<sup>25</sup> At both Kent State and in Greensboro, victims and the families of those killed sought justice through both state and federal courts, but they found instead that the legal system was biased against them and refused to hear their claims fully or fairly.

The legal travails after the Kent State shootings demonstrate the difficulties of turning to the courts to achieve justice or affix blame when the gunmen are representatives of the state. Neither the state of Ohio nor the federal government wanted to indict or blame the Ohio National Guard for the shootings. President Nixon even sought to prevent the Department of Justice from investigating. When the state of Ohio convened a grand jury in October 1970, it indicted twenty-five of the protesters rather than any guardsmen. Continued pressure finally resulted in a federal criminal trial in 1974 for eight of the guardsmen who fired their guns, but a judge dismissed the case on the grounds of lack of evidence.<sup>26</sup> When the guardsmen faced charges in a federal civil trial the following year, the defense team successfully put the student protesters on trial instead. Defense attorneys called students terrorists and sought to associate students at Kent State with radical groups like the Weathermen. As one of the plaintiffs recalled, “They [the guards] weren’t put on trial. We were.”<sup>27</sup> In the end, the jury held that none of the guardsmen was legally responsible for the shootings, and it ordered the parents of the dead and of the nine survivors to pay court costs. The federal courts, in other words, accepted the guardsmen’s position that they acted in self-defense.<sup>28</sup>

In Greensboro, unlike in Kent, the state of North Carolina quickly moved to arrest many of the Klansmen and Nazis who had been involved in the shooting, and six were put on trial for first-degree murder in 1980. From the start, however, the victims felt that the trial was rigged against them. During jury selection, the prosecutors asked potential jurors whether they “could be fair in this case even though the victims were communists who stood for everything we hate in America?”<sup>29</sup> One man who would serve on the jury answered that he thought it was less of a crime to kill a communist. The jury foreman, moreover, was a Cuban activist opposed to Castro and to communism. Perhaps not surprisingly, CWP members and relatives of those killed and injured felt the trial was inherently biased against them, and they decided not to testify, fearing their politics would only come under further attack if they took the stand.<sup>30</sup> The activists of the Communist Workers Party also felt that

the existing evidence—which included many other witnesses and videotapes of the shooting—would speak for itself. But the jury ultimately acquitted the six Klan and Nazi defendants of all charges, on the grounds that they acted in self-defense. As one juror told the media after the trial, “From the very beginning, it was the Communists who did the attacking. It was the Communists who started beating the cars with sticks.”<sup>31</sup> A second federal trial in 1984 ended in the same result, even though CWP members cooperated with the process and testified before the jury.

These trials did not reconcile the historical record or affix blame or accountability. Instead, they further delegitimized the victims’ sense of the reality of what happened in Kent and in Greensboro. As one North Carolina editorial noted in the wake of the acquittals in the federal Greensboro trial, the verdict seemed to contradict reality: “The implicit message that the system has set forth—that no one was *really* murdered, that no one’s rights were *really* violated—stands in shocking contradiction to the bloody events recorded on the video tape that day. Until reality and the verdicts are reconciled, justice has not been done.”<sup>32</sup>

The trials that took place in Kent and Greensboro are extreme examples of the problems that can arise in the justice system, but even at its best, the legal system offers only limited potential for resolving the kinds of contestations of history that developed in the aftermath of these two shooting incidents. While legal trials can send a powerful message that no individual is above the law and that societal harms can be redressed through existing legal norms, the very nature of the legal process itself makes a trial a limited tool for addressing contested histories or charges of complicity and conspiracy.<sup>33</sup> A criminal prosecution must focus narrowly on whether the evidence proves the guilt of a particular individual. Trials thus allow for only a very narrow engagement with the past. In the case of crimes where complicity might extend beyond the individuals who actually fired shots to government officials, police, or other state actors, a trial rarely offers the possibility of opening up any larger discussion of responsibility or of the social and political contexts in which the violence occurred. A legal trial in these cases emphasizes narrow agency and individual punishment for crimes that could be construed much more broadly.<sup>34</sup> Trials, moreover, are often highly selective; at Kent State, twenty-eight guardsmen fired their guns, but only eight were ever tried. This selectivity can make the process seem unfair or arbitrary. And although trials can lead to the collection of enormous amounts of evidence, which can help make a historical record more complete, they do not have the goal of uncovering the truth of an event or resolving differences among historical accounts. As legal theorist Martha Minow argues, trials are not particularly useful if the goal is establishing consensus about “controversial, complex events.”<sup>35</sup> The legal form itself is, another scholar notes, “ill-suited to deal with the subtleties of facing the past.”<sup>36</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, even when the victims in Kent and Greensboro achieved some success in the courtroom, the historical record remained divided and unsettled.

In both Kent and Greensboro, victims eventually won small cash awards (the result of a civil trial in Greensboro, and of a settlement in a federal civil trial in Kent), but these payouts did little to affirm the activists’ view of events or to affix responsibility for the shootings on the gunmen or on political authorities more generally. The verdict in the civil trial that held the police and the Klansmen and Nazis jointly liable for one of the five deaths did not resolve the factual issues of the case. Even though the city of Greensboro agreed to pay the cash settlement on behalf of both the police department and the Klansmen and Nazis, it refused to accept any responsibility or liability for what had happened and offered no apology.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, a 1979 out-of-court settlement in a federal civil case awarded wounded students and parents of the dead at Kent State \$675,000, but the statement signed by the Ohio National Guard did not apologize or accept responsibility for the shootings. Indeed, the settlement statement insisted that the university had followed the law in banning the student rally and ordering protesters to disperse. It also suggested that “fearful and anxious” guardsmen may have believed that their lives were in danger, even though “hindsight suggests that another method” could have been used to resolve the confrontation.<sup>38</sup> This statement, a *New York Post* editorial noted, made it seem as if the deaths were an unfortunate tragedy rather than the result of actions by the Guard. As a result, despite the cash settlement, the *Post* predicted, “Kent State will remain an open and disturbing case indefinitely.”<sup>39</sup>

But if the courtroom is not the best site for resolving these pasts, what steps can be taken to grapple with a contested past? Here, recent events in Greensboro prove instructive. More than twenty-five years after the shootings, community activists in Greensboro established an independent truth and reconciliation commission to try to uncover a more complete and accurate story of what happened on November 3, 1979, and to address the underlying causes and legacies of the violence that took place that day. While truth commissions have proven quite popular internationally since the first one was established in 1974, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) represents the first full-fledged commission of this kind in the United States.<sup>40</sup> Commissions are typically official bodies established by a state undergoing a political transition; they investigate past human rights abuses and make recommendations to prevent future violence and to heal existing social ruptures caused by the violent past. Greensboro adapted the truth commission model to grapple with a single incident of violence and set it up as a community endeavor, rather than the act of a state.

The idea of establishing a truth and reconciliation commission in Greensboro first arose in 1999, at events marking the twentieth anniversary of the shooting, when two groups founded by survivors raised the question of whether an organization modeled on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission might serve as a way for Greensboro to address the continued community rifts left by the violence of November



3, 1979. With the assistance of the New York-based Institute for Transitional Justice, they worked to build support in the community for the creation of an independent truth commission to explore the event.<sup>41</sup> Supporters knew that only a truly independent commission could be effective. The truth commission in Greensboro, unlike most of those elsewhere in the world, would not be an official body established by a state or governing authority. The city of Greensboro did not organize the commission; in fact, the city council ultimately voted to oppose its formation. But the victims of the shootings and former CWP members could not be in charge of the commission either, if the group hoped to have any legitimacy. Thus, while former CWP activists came up with the idea for a truth and reconciliation commission, they worked hard to ensure that the commission would be autonomous and would have widespread community support; they had to be willing to cede control over the event to an independent group. By February 2004, a wide variety of community organizations, including local colleges and universities, labor groups, the mayor's office, and religious and political groups, had agreed to appoint members to a committee to select the truth commissioners. The selection committee chose seven people to serve on the commission, including a retired corporate attorney, a minister, a college professor, and several community activists. Of the seven, three were white, three were black, and one was Southeast Asian.<sup>42</sup> In 2005, the commission formally began its work.

From the start, the GTRC had two key goals: to help develop a more accurate record of what had happened on November 3—to find some kind of “truth” about the event—and to help Greensboro achieve some form of reconciliation or healing. As the GTRC’s declaration of intent noted, the commission sought to engage with the past in order to “lead Greensboro into becoming a more just, understanding, and compassionate community.”<sup>43</sup> In fact, these two goals of truth and reconciliation are inevitably intertwined, because a community cannot move forward and grapple with the continuing legacies of past violence without coming to at least some basic agreements about what actually happened and who was responsible. Moving forward requires engaging with, and weighing, the different versions of history that circulate about an event. Reconciliation does not mean that all memories or versions of history are necessarily granted equal legitimacy or weight. Indeed, one of the most important parts of any meaningful reckoning with violence is recognizing that myths or untruths often develop around instances of political violence, and that some histories have been silenced or marginalized. A “central task” for any truth commission, Martha Minow explains, is developing as coherent and complex a narrative of what actually happened as it can.<sup>44</sup>

Greensboro offers a powerful window into the potential of this kind of work to respond to wounds not healed by time more effectively than a legal trial. In order to uncover as much of the truth about the 1979 shootings as possible, the GTRC deliberately structured its work to engage a wide variety of community members

and to examine both the causes and the legacies of the shootings. The commission took public statements from more than 125 community members about the causes, context, and consequences of the shootings, and the commissioners analyzed all available records, from trial transcripts to newspaper coverage.<sup>45</sup> They also held three public hearings in which a total of 54 people gave statements about the events in Greensboro, the history leading up to November 3, and the connections between the events of November 3 and today.<sup>46</sup> Speakers at the public hearings covered a broad range: Klansmen who were involved in the 1979 event, injured CWP members and family members of those who were killed, former residents of the housing project where the shootings took place, the judge and attorneys from one of the legal trials, community activists, elected officials, police officers, labor organizers, and historians. Between 300 and 500 members of the community attended each of the two-day public hearings. Other community members attended meetings or community dialogues to talk about the shootings and their legacies in Greensboro today.<sup>47</sup>

The final report issued by the GTRC in 2007 suggests ways in which truth commissions can help establish a more honest narrative about a contested incident, one with greater legitimacy than the stories previously told by either side in the conflict. While the commissioners admitted that they could not establish the complete truth of the event, they hoped their efforts would take the city “some distance away from the half-truths, misunderstandings, myths and hurtful interpretations that have marked the story until now.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps most significantly, the commission challenged the common perception that the incident was a shootout for which each side bore equal responsibility. The GTRC found that the Klansmen and Nazis came to the march deliberately to provoke violence, that they opened fire first, and that only one of the five CWP members killed was armed at the time. The commission did not absolve the CWP of all responsibility for the event; a few of the CWP members did fire back, and the incendiary rhetoric they aimed at the Klan was extremely naive. Nevertheless, the commissioners reminded the community that the Klan also engaged in violent rhetoric, which it, unlike the CWP, had backed with violent action.<sup>49</sup>

The commissioners also drew very different conclusions about the role of official actors in the 1979 killings than those long put forward by political authorities. They found that the Greensboro city police had intentionally withheld adequate protection from the demonstrators and that the absence of the police was the “single most important element that contributed to the violent outcome.”<sup>50</sup> They also concluded that the police’s handling of the incident had been colored by the officers’ negative perceptions of communism and of the CWP. The GTRC also criticized city officials for deliberately misleading the public about what had happened on November 3 in order to protect the police department and the city’s reputation. Moreover, perhaps most fundamentally—and in direct contradiction to city officials and community members who charged that the shooting had not had any long-term negative impact

on Greensboro—the GTRC found that the incident had had “devastating effects on our community” that continued to the present day. The GTRC thus concluded that “many of our elected leaders are either horribly out of touch with, willfully blind to, or simply unconcerned about the lingering pain and the stifling workings of power in this community.”<sup>51</sup> Although it is unlikely that even this strongly worded and well-documented final report will resolve all the differences in the interpretations of the 1979 event, the GTRC has achieved what historian Michael Ignatieff has argued is one of the key benefits of truth commissions: they can narrow the range of permissible lies that can be told about the past.<sup>52</sup>

Will the GTRC lead Greensboro down a path toward reconciliation and healing? In truth, it is too soon to assess the long-term consequences of the GTRC’s investigation and conclusions, although early indications suggest that the process has had a positive impact on Greensboro.<sup>53</sup> It is clear, however, that the truth commission process enabled the community of Greensboro to reckon with the historical myths and untruths that had developed around the November 3 event in a way that legal trials did not. Based on the historical record that it has put forth and helped legitimize, the GTRC called for a broad range of remedies, including recommendations that the city formally apologize and take specific steps to reduce racial and economic inequalities in Greensboro. Moreover, the process itself demonstrated that people in a community can come together, despite opposition from elected leaders, to seek truth and work toward reconciliation.<sup>54</sup>

Even if the GTRC succeeds only in helping to establish a more accurate historical record of what happened, it must be judged a success. Political theorist Gregory Streich argues that survivors and descendants of historical injustice must mobilize alternative memories and interpretations of the past in order to “unsettle, undermine, and alter the ‘ruling memory’ that a nation develops in which injustices of the past are constructed as minimally important, discrete, and non-systematic events or ‘details’ of history, or simply aberrations in an otherwise just society.”<sup>55</sup> In Greensboro, the victims of violence found that the only way for them to alter a well-established ruling memory was to work for an independent commission purposefully and carefully designed to seek truth. There is no simple formula to ease the pain of a Kent State or a Greensboro, but the truth process carried out in Greensboro seems to be a first step toward putting to rest that city’s past, a past that for so long has refused to lie down quietly.

## NOTES

1. For a good basic background on the Greensboro shootings, see Elizabeth Wheaton, *Code-name GREENKIL: The 1979 Greensboro Killings* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1987).
2. Philip Caputo, *Thirteen Seconds: A Look Back at the Kent State Shootings* (New York: Chantrelain Books, 2005), 77. In actuality, as political scientist John Logue has noted, Kent State can be viewed as an example of a long tradition of the American government using force to quell dissent. John Logue, “Official Violence,” in Bills, *Kent State/May 4*, 143–49.
3. In Greensboro, it did turn out that a handful of the demonstrators were armed with handguns and that a few did shoot back once the Klan opened fire. However, none of the attackers were injured and the vast majority of the demonstrators did not have any weapons. An exact sequence of events and a detailed description of shots fired is available in Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter, GTRC), *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, presented to the residents of Greensboro, the City, the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project, and other public bodies on May 25, 2006 (Greensboro, N.C.: GTRC, 2006), 178–85.
4. Bills, “Introduction,” 2.
5. Thomas R. Hensley and Jerry M. Lewis note that the Kent State shootings “have certainly come to symbolize the deep political and social divisions that so sharply divided the country during the Vietnam War era.” See Hensley and Lewis, “The May 4 Shootings at Kent State University: The Search for Historical Accuracy,” in *Kent State and May 4th*, ed. Hensley and Lewis, 54.
6. Cited in Gordon, *Fourth of May*, 18. James Michener found countless letters to the editor in the aftermath of the shootings, some criticizing the shootings and others expressing approval for the Ohio National Guard. Michener, *Kent State: What Happened*, 434–46.
7. Gordon, *Fourth of May*, 36.
8. Only two of the four students killed and five of the nine students injured at Kent had been involved in the protests. Sandra Scheuer, who had been observing on the Commons when the rally began, was shot while on her way to her afternoon class. William Schroeder, an ROTC student, was simply observing the protests when he was killed. *Ibid.*, 186.
9. For a summary of the local press coverage of the incident, see Scott Pryor, “A Direction of Truth and Love: Representation, Bearing Witness, and the History of November 3, 1979” (senior honors thesis, Guilford College, 2002), chap. 2; and Sandy Michele Beranzohn, “The Media’s Demonization of the Radical Left: Two Case Studies” (college honors thesis, University of Vermont, 2003).
10. Signe Waller, “A City of Two Tales: The Greensboro Massacre of November 3, 1979 in Fact, Context and Meaning,” unpublished report submitted to the GTRC, Greensboro, N.C., February 2005.
11. Greensboro’s mayor, Jim Melvin, insisted the day after the shooting that it had been committed “by people from outside our community” and that it had “absolutely no relationship with race problems here.” Jim Melvin, quoted in *Greensboro Daily News*, Nov. 4, 1979, cited in the Greensboro, North Carolina, Human Relations Commission Report, Greensboro, N.C., Oct. 6, 1980, 9.

12. Greensboro Police Department, An Administrative Report of the Anti-Klan Rally, Greensboro, North Carolina, November 3, 1979, Greensboro, N.C., Nov. 19, 1979, Civil Rights Greensboro (website), <http://www.greensbororc.org/1979\_policewvo.pdf>, 40; Greensboro, North Carolina, Human Relations Commission Report, 2.
13. Bernanzohn, "The Media's Demonization of the Radical Left: Two Case Studies" (college honors thesis, University of Vermont, 2003), 44.
14. Greensboro, North Carolina, Human Relations Commission Report, 4.
15. Waller, "A City of Two Tales," 5. The survivors of the attack have written extensively about their perspective of the events of November 3. In addition to Waller, see Paul Bernanzohn and Sally A. Bernanzohn, *The Greensboro Massacre* (New York: CesarCauce Publishers and Distributors, 1980); Sally A. Bernanzohn, *Thought Survivor's Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 2003); Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).
16. For accounts of the events by guardsmen, see Edward J. Grant and Michael Hill, *I Was There: What Really Went on at Kent State* (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., 1974); and William Furlong, "The Guardsmen's View of the Tragedy at Kent State," *New York Times Magazine*, June 21, 1970, 12. Scholars and official reports have discredited the version of events recounted in the preceding sources. See, for example, I. F. Stone, *The Killings at Kent State: How Murder Went Unpunished* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970); and *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1970).
17. Carole Barbato, Laura Davis, and Mark Seeman, "Outline of April 30–May 4, 1970" (unpublished paper, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, March 2009), 4–5; Hensley, *Kent State Incident*, 42–48; Gordon, *Fourth of May*, 51–57.
18. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 4–12, 17–19.
19. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 39.
20. The term *memory work* comes from Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, 8. In Greensboro, survivors have not only written extensively about their experiences, but also worked for years to help organize a truth commission. In Kent, ongoing memory works include the oral history project conducted by the Special Collections and Archives division of the Kent State University Libraries, the May 4 Task Force work on the annual May 4 Commemorations, and the building of a May 4 Visitors Center to educate the public about the shootings.
21. Bishop Desmond Tutu, "Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Experiences of the Truth Commission," remarks at the Nobel Peace Laureates Conference, University of Virginia, Nov. 5, 1998, <http://www.virginia.edu/nobel/transcript/tutu.html>.
22. Michael Frisby, "Kent Case Just Won't Stay Quiet in the Grave," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Sept. 13, 1981, cited in Gordon, *The Fourth of May*, 89.
23. Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).
24. The contemporary efforts to prosecute decades-old civil rights era murders attest to the interests of families in seeing the killers of their relatives brought to justice. Since 1989, local, state, or federal authorities have reexamined evidence in nearly thirty cases of unsolved civil rights murders. Twenty-three men have been convicted for their participation in these crimes, including James Edward Seal, who was convicted in 2007 for his role in the 1964 killing of two young black men in Mississippi. A list of cases—both those that have resulted in trials and convictions and those that are still pending or have been closed—is available at Northeastern University, "Civil Rights and Restorative Justice" <http://www.northeastern.edu/crrj/cold\_cases/cold\_case\_watch/>.
25. GTRC, *Final Report*, 258.
26. Overviews of the Kent State trials are available in Hensley, *Kent State Incident*, 84–134; and Gordon, *Fourth of May*, 115–27; 135–57.
27. Robby Stamps, Letter to *Daily Kent States*, Oct. 2, 1975, qtd. in Gordon, *Fourth of May*, 141. For a full account of the 1975 federal civil trial, see Kehler and Murves, *Kent State Coverup*.
28. Hensley and Lewis, "The May 4 Shootings at Kent State University," 57.
29. GTRC, *Final Report*, 262.
30. There is some confusion about whether CWP members were even asked to testify during this first trial. Moreover, some CWP members felt that they could not testify safely because they had been indicted on riot charges and feared incriminating themselves.
31. "Jurors Say Self-Defense was Critical Factor in Klan-Nazi Trial," AP Wire Service, Nov. 18, 1980, qtd. in GTRC, *Final Report*, 276.
32. "Jury Foreman Explains Verdict," *Charlotte Observer*, Apr. 18, 1984, qtd. in GTRC, *Final Report*, 289.
33. For a discussion of the comparative benefits and limitations of legal trials, see Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1998), 25–51.
34. On the inherent limitations of the form of a legal trial, see Margaret M. Russell, "Cleaning Moments and Retrospective Justice," *Mich. L. Rev.* 101 (2003): 1225; Margaret M. Russell, "Reopening the Emmett Till Case: Lessons and Challenges for Critical Race Practice," *Fordham L. Rev.* 73 (2005): 2101; and Robert Gordon, "Undoing Historical Injustice" in *Justice and Injustice in Law and Legal Theory*, ed. Austin Sarat and Thomas H. Kearns (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1999), 35–76.
35. Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 47.
36. Tina Rosenberg, *The Haunted Land*, 351, qtd. in Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 51.
37. GTRC, *Final Report*, 307. The police and Klan were held liable for only one of the deaths, that of Dr. Mike Nathan. Although Nathan's wife was a member of the CWP, Nathan himself was not, and he was a sympathetic figure because he worked at a clinic for low-income children.
38. Settlement statement issued by the defendants in Cleveland, Ohio, Jan. 4, 1979; "Legal Chronology May 5, 1970–January 4, 1979," comp. and ed. Margaret Ann Gammon, Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University Libraries, Kent, Ohio, <http://special.lib.kent.edu/amay70/legalchronology.html>.
39. "The Kent State Verdict," *New York Post*, Aug. 29, 1975, cited in Gordon, *Fourth of May*, 157.
40. There is an extensive literature on truth commissions, especially on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The best overview of truth commissions available

is in Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2002). The GTRC's *Final Report* notes that forty truth commissions, including both official and unofficial ones, were established between 1994 and 2005. Between 1974 and 2004, at least twenty-six different nations established official truth commissions to grapple with their histories of systematic human rights abuses, including Argentina, El Salvador, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and, most famously, South Africa. A full list is available at <[http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/truth\\_commissions/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/truth_commissions/)>. The GTRC was not the first truth-seeking commission in the United States, but it was the first group to fully embrace the truth and reconciliation model that has been used by many other nations around the globe. There are a few important precedents for the GTRC in this country, including the official commissions set up to study and address race riots in Wilmington in 1898 and Tulsa in 1921.

41. Lisa Magarell, Senior Associate, International Center for Transitional Justice, interview by author, Jan. 21, 2005; also see "ICTJ Activity: The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," International Center for Transitional Justice, <<http://www.ictj.org/en/where/region2/517.html>>.

42. On the development of the GTRC, the selection process, and the background of the commissioners, see Spoma Jovanovic, "The Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project: Communication for Community Change" (paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, New Orleans, La., 2006), <<http://www.webster.edu/peacepsychology/jovanovic.pdf>>. See also GTRC, *Final Report*, 455–61.

43. Statement from "The Declaration" of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Project, reprinted in GTRC, *Final Report*, 454.

44. Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 58, 60

45. GTRC, *Final Report*, 520.

46. A complete list of speakers at the public hearings and audio files and transcripts of much of the testimony are available in the Statement Archives section of the GTRC website, online at <[http://www.greensborotr.org/hear\\_statements.php](http://www.greensborotr.org/hear_statements.php)>.

47. For more details about these community meetings and dialogues, see GTRC, *Final Report*, especially 32–36, 463–80.

48. "Executive Summary," GTRC, <[http://www.greensborotr.org/exec\\_summary.pdf](http://www.greensborotr.org/exec_summary.pdf)>, 2.

49. *Ibid.*, 15.

50. *Ibid.*, 7.

51. *Ibid.*, 20.

52. Quoted in Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 25.

53. The truth process in Greensboro has already led to the creation of new activist groups and new efforts at community cross-racial dialogues. The local newspaper agreed to implement the GTRC's recommendation to create a citizen's advisory group, and a new grassroots effort has developed to push for the city to pay employees and contractors a living wage. Spoma Jovanovic, "The Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project: Communication for Community Change" (paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, New Orleans, La., 2006).

54. Lewis Pitts, the attorney who represented the survivors in their 1980 civil lawsuit against the Klan, the city, and the FBI, believes that the GTRC represents an example

of "democratic self-government." This process, Pitts argues, "paves the way towards democracy, putting into action the philosophy that government is of the people, by the people, and for the people." Lewis Pitts, "Local Vocal: Nov. 3, 1979 Reveals Police-Hate Group Complicity," *Yes! Weekly*, July 13–19, 2005, 21; Lewis Pitts, interview by author, July 14, 2005, Greensboro, N.C.

55. Gregory Streich, "Is There a Right to Forget? Historical Injustices, Race, Memory, and Identity," *New Political Science* 24, no. 4 (2002): 534.