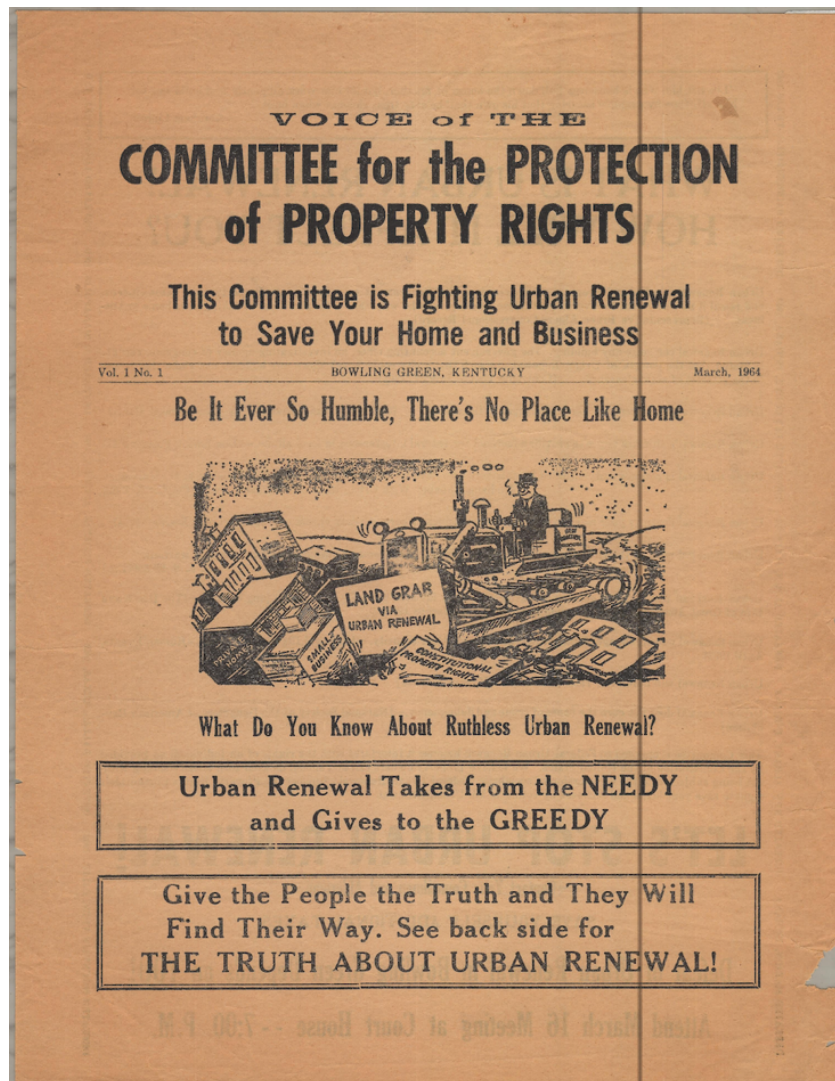


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

To Teach the University is to Teach Reparations: A Class Project

by John Conley



A FLYER AGITATING AGAINST THE DESTRUCTION OF JONESVILLE, 1964. COURTESY OF WKU ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

Reparations are a way of democratizing history and hearing those voices that were silenced in the past.

- Charles P. Henry, *Long Overdue: The Politics of Racial Reparations*

Because the university is the ground beneath our feet, we tend to take it for granted.

- Jeffrey Williams, "Teach the University"

On Introduction

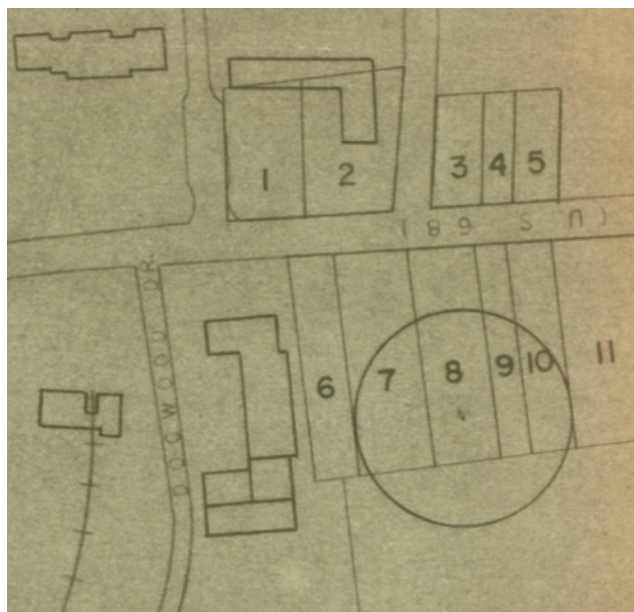
Even before the murder of George Floyd sparked the most widespread and sustained protests in the US since the Civil Rights Movement, the case for reparations had been re-emerging as a central demand of those calling for racial justice for African Americans in the United States. And although such a call may sound like novel ideas born of our present exigencies, scholars such as Roy L. Brooks, Charles P. Henry, or Robin D.G. Kelly would be quick to remind us that, since as far back as the end of the Civil War, there have been countless and varied proposals for reparations as partial compensation for the enslavement of Black people. Since then, calls for reparations have increasingly considered post-slavery injuries and injustices—such as Jim Crow laws, the exclusions of New Deal programs, voting restrictions, and police brutality—to be as central to their arguments for Black redress. This broader definition of reparations is a central thesis of Ta-Nehisi Coates's influential 2015 essay "The Case for Reparations," for example, which takes up the case of redlining and contract home-buying in Chicago. As Coates emphasizes, to properly understand the stakes and scope of the demands for reparations, we must reckon with the way that social, legal, and political institutions have wielded powerful tools – such as housing policy – to continue to injure, exploit, and compromise Black communities and Black people.

Nikole Hannah-Jones offers a most powerful recent example of the call for reparations in her essay "What Is Owed." Building on the legacy of numerous historians, legal scholars, and activists, Hannah-Jones constructs in just a few pages a sweeping, schematic history of the social, economic, and political inequities that have harmed African Americans. Hannah-Jones draws specifically on a 2018 Duke University study called "What We Get Wrong About Closing the Racial Wealth Gap," whose lead author is the economist and reparations scholar William "Sandy" Darity, Jr. Significantly, Darity et al. argue that the racial wealth gap is not just about poverty, nor about many of the other common "explanations" such as spending habits, education, or the lack of financial literacy. In fact, explanations such as these are myths that obscure an economic system "heavily infused at every point with both an inheritance of racism and the ongoing authority of white supremacy" (Darity et al. 3). Drawing on Darity's work, Hannah-Jones puts forward a strong case for the main target of reparations to be the wealth gap between White and Black Americans. In doing so, the case of reparations becomes about so much more than the fact of enslavement, attempting to account for and

repair the inequity wrought by a multi-faceted legacy of racial injustice against African-Americans in the United States.

When we put it this way, the university is hardly immune from critique – and not surprisingly, the university has become an important site of the renewed struggle for reparations. As of now, most critical attention both on the page and in the streets has been pointed at private, elite universities in which the fact of the university's founding during the antebellum US becomes a flash point for the discussions of the legacy of slavery. However, using my own university teaching context as an example, I will go on to insist that the discussion of reparations in the context of the American university need not – and indeed, should not – be limited to those institutions that were funded from slavery's profits or were literally built with slave labor. By discussing a course project that looks into my own university's history of racial injustice, I model one strategy for educators to take up the discussion of reparations while continuing to expand its reach to encompass more recent and ongoing injuries to Black communities.

I teach composition at Western Kentucky University (WKU), a public, regional-comprehensive university in Bowling Green, KY. Inspired by the recent intensification of reparations discourse and wanting to bring these issues home for students, I designed a course project in which students investigated and wrote about the history of Jonesville, a Black neighborhood in Bowling Green that was razed to make way for a major expansion of WKU in the 1960s. The displacement of hundreds of residents and the



A DETAIL OF A MAP SHOWING THE BASKETBALL ARENA AND PARKING STRUCTURES DRAWN OVER THE OWNERSHIP PLOTS OF JONESVILLE RESIDENTS. CIRCA 1963. COURTESY OF WKU ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

demolition of a vibrant neighborhood, legitimated by the laws of eminent domain and funded almost completely by federal urban renewal money, played a central role in the geographic and institutional expansion of WKU. This history – one that has analogous other examples at institutions across the country – should give us great pause. For

although there have been numerous attempts to theorize the ways that our classrooms *reflect* the racial inequities of our society, we must take more seriously that so many of our classrooms are literally *built* on the site of those inequities. Put simply: it's the ground beneath our feet.

My hope is that my course project and this article can contribute to the growing chorus of voices around the country calling for a reckoning with racial injustice. In addition to addressing the course objectives that concern academic writing, I had two pedagogical goals for my students: 1) to develop a deeper insight into issues of racism, history, and accountability; 2) to locate these issues in the past, present, and future of our own community and our own institution. In doing so, I am practicing two broad but significant pedagogical commitments: on the one hand, to respond to the calls of Gloria Ladson-Billings, bell hooks, and others to do "culturally relevant" anti-racist work in the classroom; and, on the other, to respond to the calls from Jeffrey Williams and others to "teach the university" – that is, to insist that the university and its cultural and social history be made a critical object of study.

Both critical genealogies demand that I locate myself within and as a product of this history. I am a White, cis-gender man teaching in buildings that were off-limits to Black students during segregation, and I am part of a faculty that is only 7% African American – a slightly lower percentage than the 8% of our student body that is African American (WKU Fact Book). Even using these superficial numbers demonstrates that our campus is deeply marked by the legacy of segregation and structured by the fact of racial inequity. What is more, I have a job in no small part thanks to the 1966 expansion of Western Kentucky State College into what is now Western Kentucky University. It was during this period of great expansion and reorganization that Jonesville was razed and its residents forced out. In other words, I both benefit from and am a product of exactly the racist and violent history I am asking my students to learn about, criticize, and imagine differently. I approach this topic not simply as a curious and distant historian but as someone whose social position as an instructor is conditioned directly by the razing of Jonesville, the displacement of its residents, and the theft of their accumulated wealth.

Using my assignments as a framework, I describe how I blend a desire to "teach the university" with a goal both to further and to localize calls for reparations. I discuss some of the strengths and limitations of the project, offering suggestions for teaching similar projects. I include student writing gathered from research projects and final reflection essays to give voice to my students' experiences and ideas, while presenting a critical self-reflection on my implementation of the project as a White, cis-male instructor. For scholars of both critical university studies and anti-racism, the university is hardly a transparent or neutral institution, but one that acts as a key site of the production and reproduction of the central inequalities that characterize our society. In what follows, I will show that teaching at this intersection can be especially powerful when we turn some

attention to the literal ground beneath our feet at our own institutions.

Course Context

I teach this unit in a 100-level composition course as part of my university's general education requirements. As a pedagogue, I specialize in teaching those who have been up until recently called "remedial" or "basic" writers, and many of my classes are an enhanced English 100 designed for students who are classified by university metrics as needing extra academic support. This is notable for at least two reasons: 1) my class meets five days a week, alternating between "class" and "writing lab" – as a result, these classes offer space and time that may be lacking in classes on a more traditional schedule; and 2) at my university, like many others, the way that racially-suspect standardized test scores are interpreted means that my enhanced classes have significantly more students of color than other classes– and, as a result, my classes are consistently composed of a majority or near-majority of students of color even though I teach at a predominantly White institution (PWI). In my classes, I mostly have students who identify as Black or White, but I routinely work also with students who identify as Latinx and Asian. Students tend to come from a mix of small, rural towns and counties as well as from large metropolitan areas, and this mix was well-represented by my students this term. Many students are first generation college students, and almost all students are working significant hours while taking classes.

To set up this assignment, my first unit asks students to critically examine their educational experiences, broadly conceived, before coming to college. We spend time in class sharing and comparing stories – often from high school – and hone a shared orientation of critical inquiry. To this end, we read selections from John Taylor Gatto and selections from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and take a week to "unpack" several chapters of James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Modeled on one of the prompts from Bartholomae, Petrosky, and Waite's *Ways of Reading*, the first formal writing assignment requires students to choose an example from their educational experience and to "read it" like one of our assigned authors. In the context of an academic writing course, it is practice for students to place their own experience in conversation with an outside author, and for many students it reframes their frustrations and criticisms about their prior experiences with schooling. In the context of my course, this assignment is particularly useful because it prompts students to develop a critique of education that exceeds a criticism of any one teacher or principal. Conceptually speaking, this is a key component that makes way for the unit concerning reparations.

Here at WKU, 100-level composition classes are designed to achieve student outcomes that involve the successful use of primary and secondary sources, the ability to position their own voice in conversation with others, and a development of their ideas through feedback and revision. To this end, my 100-level courses often are centered around a large project in the middle of the semester in order to

provide ample time for students to read, research, and develop drafts along the way. Working in a relatively traditional department, these projects always arc toward individual, academic essays, though I also evaluate and provide feedback for many other aspects of the unit such as informal journal entries, process writing, thesis revisions, peer reviews, reflections, and the like. Thus, I grade these units more like portfolios than individual essays, and the goal here is for students to understand the essay as a part – a large part, indeed, but a part nonetheless – of a larger personal project.

The Case for Reparations at Western Kentucky University

The central reading for this unit was Ta-Nehisi Coates's essay "The Case for Reparations," which worked to both frame and inform our discussions. Before we read it, however, I introduced the class to the issues by screening a 2014 Bill Moyers interview with Coates, encouraging students to select moments from the discussion that seemed compelling, controversial, or about which they had questions. Students then developed a list of questions they would have liked to ask Coates about the issues, and we used this list as a kind of roadmap for reading Coates's essay. I would suggest this interview for a few reasons, but most importantly because of the ways that Coates so clearly articulates his view of reparations as a large-scale, government initiative as opposed to small-scale individual White "paybacks." The interview is also a good way for students to be introduced to Coates as an author and a thinker before diving into a long and – at least for many of my 100-level students – admittedly formidable essay. When we turned to the essay, we spent considerable class time looking at passages, developing our conceptual vocabulary, and understanding the nuances of Coates's analysis. I did my best to let student interest and concerns guide and shape our reading, though at times I interjected when I felt like the class might benefit for the sake of clarity or efficiency.

On the last day of that week, my class met at the Guthrie Tower, a twelve-story memorial bell tower at the center of our campus. Conceived in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks and erected in 2002, the Guthrie Tower honors veterans and "celebrate[s] the freedom we share as American citizens." Ornate granite etchings include depictions of a former university president and other prominent alumni and/or faculty that served in combat, depicting them in military uniforms and postures. The tower is surrounded by benches engraved with quotations from disparate historical figures such as George W. Bush, Mitch McConnell, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Visible from the tower are the main sports complex, including Football, Basketball, and Baseball Stadiums, parking garages, and other buildings, all of which occupy the place of the former Jonesville neighborhood. At this central crossroads of our campus, there is no marker or mention of Jonesville. But the tower offers a pleasant place to gather as a group, and so we met there, taking time to notice, write, and discuss what we saw and how we regularly experience this place. I asked

the students to take 10 minutes to observe and then describe what they see and how they feel here. In such close proximity to the student union, the sports stadiums, and the campus gym, much of our discussion centered on how many students see these places as important sites of community and identity as WKU students.

It was here that I chose to introduce the history of Jonesville to the students by way of handing out the essay assignment. Numerous students commented that this was a particularly effective gesture, one that worked to simultaneously reframe how they see their own campus as well as set the stage for our work to come. During one of my sections, an official campus tour group came through and – as if on cue – proceeded to laud the "awesome" sports facilities and the "super cool gym" at the "center of social life here at WKU." Of course, there was no mention of Jonesville, and once the tour left my students and I had a chance to reflect on the tour guide's script. Some students began to question right away whether the university has an obligation to inform prospective students of the history of the campus, and our discussion became a sort of first iteration of the work we would develop together over the next few weeks. Of course, such coincidences are difficult to schedule, but I was reminded of the way in which class-time out of the traditional classroom often allows for these kinds of unplanned yet highly teachable moments. In any case, the point was to give the students a chance to imagine a very different kind of community in the very place they now inhabit. For my students, it was a class discussion that grounded our work for weeks to come, often coming back up in subsequent discussions and then explored further in several final student essays.

From there, our class then spent time visiting two nearby museums: first the African-American Museum of Bowling Green, a small, converted house at a far edge of our campus that, though technically on university property, is independently maintained by a small group of mostly elders from our local Black communities; and the second, the Kentucky Museum, a grand, central gathering place and focal point of our campus that was built by the Public Works Administration and that is staffed by almost exclusively by White museum professionals and academics. The African American Museum consists of a few small rooms of pictures and artifacts that represent various aspects of Black history in south-central Kentucky. However, our visit there was first and foremost meant to give students a chance to hear from and engage with elders such as Maxine Ray, who had grown up in Jonesville and lived through its demise. Some students found these first-hand testimonies especially powerful and persuasive; as one student put it, Ray "actually lived through this. She actually knows what really happened." Judging by how often my students referred to our time at the African American Museum, it was clearly memorable for them to hear what it was like for a community of hundreds of people to be at turns denigrated and then displaced. I also received feedback from several of my Black students that they appreciated the chance to hear from African American elders, now positioned as experts and acting as a stark alternative to the predominantly White faculty of our

institution. For others, it was having an “up close” look into the historical realities of segregation that proved most memorable. One student commented, “I have heard of segregation, but I have never really seen things like signs that say ‘whites only’ or ‘colored only,’ and so for me that really made it real.” This also makes me think that some of the impact was more general, and it seems significant that students had a chance to learn about life in the Jim Crow South and the ways in which racism shaped daily life for everyday people – Black and White – in the place where they now attend college.

The Kentucky Museum, by contrast, is a large, corporate-funded museum with a mix of permanent and rotating exhibitions. The museum has a program called a “classroom close study” in which archival librarians and museum staff collaborate with faculty to present a hands-on classroom experience with artifacts from the University’s archives and special collections, and so before the semester I worked with staff to set one up concerning the Jonesville neighborhood. The trip to the Kentucky Museum, then, was meant to introduce students to a range of archival holdings that document the expansion of the university, the construction of the sports complexes, and the displacement of the residents of Jonesville. I expected a relatively “objective” presentation of the university’s holdings, but the archivists worked hard to reframe the issues to cast the university in a positive light. While I had requested a focus on documents and artifacts that highlighted the resistance to the University’s expansion and demolition of the neighborhood, the archivists chose to instead present documents that did not evidence this history, and to downplay the tensions and strife that were real, living historical forces at the time. As a result, we were able to see a sizeable collection of historical photographs, maps, and urban renewal documents, but my students were presented with a narrative of a benevolent university working in conjunction with African American community leaders to improve blighted and underutilized property.

At first, I was frustrated that my requests for the presentation had been so disregarded and assumed that my pedagogical goals would be significantly undercut. However, my students seized on the tension between the two

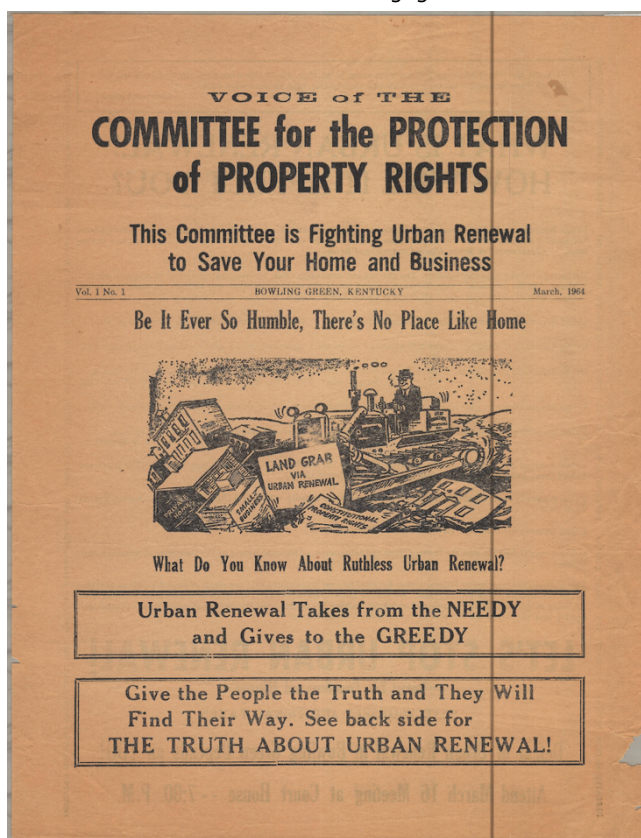
narratives presented at the respective museums. Upon reflection, student Bianca Wargel recalled an almost immediate response: “In my gut I had this funny feeling that something wasn’t right” (5). Sensing criticism from other students, too, I adjusted my class plans and decided to spend considerable time in the class periods that followed dwelling on these contradictions. As a result, we had probing and thoughtful discussions in comparing the voices, documents, narratives, and implications that we had all just experienced together. While some students found these contradictions an invitation to further investigation, others expressed clearly that they were suspicious – and in some cases, outright condemning – of what they perceived to be the University Archivist’s apologetic presentation of only part of the story. Reflecting on the experience, Kayla Jones wrote that even in the midst of numerous “official” documents, “when he [the archivist] was talking about the struggles of the community he conveyed that it wasn’t as bad as it was portrayed... [and] it felt like I was listening more to opinions on Jonesville instead of the facts and truth” (7). It was this tension that animated several of the best projects on the subject and also allowed my students to expand their engagement with mandated course outcomes. In this case,

engaging and evaluating different viewpoints, which I usually emphasize in the assignments that were to follow this one. Thus, a significant takeaway for me as a teacher was to trust my students’ existing critical abilities, and not to assume that my own curation of course materials is what completely determines my students’ own independent and powerful thinking.

The Dilemma of Inheritance: Student Responses

The central challenge for us as a class, then, was learning to articulate this dilemma as well as exploring creative ways to repair or repay our debts as a campus community. I lay out these ideas in the essay prompt:

In June of last year, Ta-Nehisi Coates testified before the United States Congress in a hearing for House Resolution (H.R.) 40, a bill that would establish a commission to study reparations. In a particularly cogent moment, Coates argued that “We recognize our lineage as a generational trust, as inheritance, and the real dilemma posed by reparations is just that: a *dilemma of inheritance*” (my emphasis). For Coates, American life presents us with the uncomfortable yet



A FLYER AGITATING AGAINST THE DESTRUCTION OF JONESVILLE, 1964. COURTESY OF WKU ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

defining choice to acknowledge the debt which we owe to those who have been mistreated in order to make way for us. Reparations for Coates and other thinkers like him is an acknowledgement that includes both words and deeds, and so part of our dilemma is not only to learn to articulate this inheritance, but also to creatively develop ways to repay our debts.

PROMPT: For your next essay, consider our dilemma of inheritance here at WKU with special regard to the historically African American community of Jonesville. For this essay to be successful, you will need to reflect on your personal experiences here at WKU, many of which literally take place where the Jonesville neighborhood once stood. And you will want to draw from our class trips to the African American Museum of Bowling Green and the Kentucky Museum, respectively, that will provide resources and artifacts that might act as anchoring texts for your essay. Additionally, you will need to do your own research and reading outside of class in order to inform and shape your writing.

In their papers, some students argued that the University was hiding the history of Jonesville, and that this was a significant injustice that needed to be addressed. For Bianca Wargel, this was most pronounced at the Kentucky Museum: “there wasn’t a single artifact on display about Jonesville, [and everything] we saw was in storage, out of view of the public” (5). In fact, Wargel was so taken by what she understood to be the contradicting narratives between the two museum presentations that her entire project attempted to come to terms with this tension. Other students, such as Courtney Ray, developed this insight as a frame for a broader discussion of the university and reparations:

We all have secrets... but sometimes secrets can affect people and their lives. The people in Jonesville have been kept a secret, and most people who either go to WKU or live in Bowling Green don’t even know how once Jonesville was right [where] WKU [now stands]. (1)

In a similar rhetorical move, Haley Flowers describes how it is possible to drive by WKU “every day and not ever know anything” about Jonesville, insisting “we need to start acknowledging what happened here on our own campus” (7). For students like Wargel, Flowers, and Ray, public acknowledgment is important because the institution carries a debt for this history. In order to partially repay it, the institution should acknowledge and actively educate the public about its role in the demolition of Jonesville and the displacement of its residents. In this vein, several students also felt that the Kentucky Museum should be compelled to represent Jonesville in its permanent displays.

Wanting to free this history from the space of a museum, Salvenia Hampton imagined numerous historical and informational markers around campus. “Every student and every tourist should have to learn about Jonesville,” Hampton writes, and WKU should “include Jonesville in every tour because that would make a huge difference” (7). For Hampton, more than finding space in the museum, incorporating the story of Jonesville into daily campus life is

what matters here. Similarly, Kayla Jones imagined at turns a large mural in Diddle Arena (our basketball facility) that would represent the neighborhood as it once stood, as well as a memorial marker that would replace the Guthrie Tower, given its central place on campus and proximity to the heart of Jonesville (8).

However, some students saw such measures as limited in their impact and explored other ideas: as Flowers writes, “A marker is not enough!” (7). Both Kayla Jones and Zion Brown argued that the African American Museum should be better funded and moved to the center of campus; for them, bringing the museum from the margins to the center of campus would not only be appropriate because “that was exactly where Jonesville was to begin with,” but would also signal more of a commitment to repairing what they take to be the ongoing marginalization of African Americans and their history at our institution. Taking this one step further, Courtney Ray and Su Meh suggested that the museum be consistently funded to specifically tell the story of Jonesville. Ray emphasized that doing so should be considered alongside other University-funded building projects: “in 2019, WKU is building a freshman village and adding on to the library, so I think we have money to spare for the African American Museum” (8). Noting the active construction around campus, students like Ray remind us that when we think of remembering Jonesville, we are dealing in the realm of priorities, not the lack of resources. Perhaps taking inspiration from the example of Georgetown University, where students voted in 2019 to offer a form of reparations to descendants of enslaved Africans who were sold in 1838 by the Jesuits running the school, Su Meh suggested that descendants of Jonesville be given free tuition at WKU, an idea that several other students took up as well.

Accounting for the Past: Post-Project Reflections

Reflecting upon the project, my students spoke again and again to the impact of the two museums. Their feedback noted how important it was to get out of the classroom, but also how much they valued getting to speak with community members and engage with archival documents. In developing their essays, a number of students expressed an interest in doing one-on-one interviews, but very few seemed interested in drawing on archived recorded and/or transcribed interviews. Even with historical photographs, though many expressed a keen interest in these artifacts and often referred to them in conversations, student engagement with such documents was very limited in their formal writing. This leads me to believe that I underestimated how much support the students needed to integrate these kinds of sources into their papers. In the future, I would build in clearer expectations and mechanisms of support for this aspect of the project.

I also should have provided more support to explore potential avenues of reparations. While I felt students were prepared to develop their ideas, many struggled to articulate responses that the institution could take, and very few chose

to develop responses that exceeded examples that were close at hand. I could imagine assigning readings from art history or museum studies that might encourage students to think more creatively and critically about their ideas for historical markers or monuments on campus. Alternatively, assigning a short piece that discusses the National Memorial for Peace and Justice might spark more far-reaching ideas. At the same time, I have reservations about tacitly endorsing symbolic steps, which might be seen as the limit to what is possible or appropriate. As reparations scholars such as Charles P. Henry, Roy L. Brooks, and Ana Lucia Araujo have suggested, this is a significant limit of current reparations discourse, and it seems critical for projects like this one to participate in the groundwork necessary to extend into what Henry calls asset- or community-building projects. With this in mind, perhaps learning about the work of Chicago Torture Justice Center (a community center that came out of years of organizing around police brutality by the Chicago Police Department) and related class activities could help students explore this limit. As my students showed, for some this limit was clearly problematic, but for most it was not something that warranted much comment or critical attention.

Similarly, many students seemed to struggle to connect our discussions with recent, highly publicized racist incidents on campus. And even when I introduced the history of the Student Government Association passing a resolution for reparations just a few years prior, it was met mostly with shrugs of disinterest; those students that did seem interested did not choose to link these events in their writing projects. Perhaps what I was experiencing is an example of what Eva Boodman has recently called in the pages of this journal “critique fatigue,” and my course design may benefit from more scaffolding so that students could see their own work as a part of other student-driven efforts to draw attention to these questions on our campus. In hindsight, I should have done more to familiarize these students with the “recent past” of our institution, and built in more time to discuss with students the ways that current debates about racism on campus resonated with our class’s concerns. Somewhat relatedly, it is certainly possible that students felt comfortable expressing criticism of the institution in the past, but less so toward the institution of the present.

I also failed at extending our inquiry into the land “beneath our feet” to include the history of Native Americans in south-central Kentucky. Given that the Shawnee and Eastern Cherokee peoples were stewards of the land long before the 1906 founding of what would become Western Kentucky University, my project as I taught it re-inscribes a violent displacement and erasure that lies beneath our conversations. In the short term, I plan to begin the class with a land acknowledgment, to focus specifically on those chapters in James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me* that discuss how conventional historical narratives at turns misconstrue, deny, and legitimate Native American displacement and genocide, and to ensure that this theme is a thread that returns in later discussions and activities. In the long term, I hope to collaborate with colleagues in History and Folk Studies in order to develop this section of

the class. If we dare to imagine what a truly reconciled and equitable university could possibly look like in the context of a structurally divided and unequal society, then we must account for this “dilemma of inheritance” as well.

My whiteness, cis-gender maleness may have contributed in some significant ways to this project’s success as well as its limits. This project received mostly positive feedback from students and broad support from my colleagues, and even received a positive write-up in the school newspaper. As of now, I have not been accused of teaching “pet political projects,” have not been doxxed by right-wing trolls, and have had to face no charges of straying from what properly constitutes an introductory composition course. I wonder how this might be different for academics who embody subject positions that tend to command less respect on the job. My whiteness and cis-gender maleness also were consciously deployed when we hit snags as a class. When one White, male student stormed out in the middle of a discussion of White supremacy, I was able to appeal to him to not feel personally attacked in ways that are probably much less available to a woman of color, for instance. Checking in and following up with students of color created space for a range of discussions about their experiences in a PWI, and though I often “named” my whiteness in these exchanges, looking back I realize that I often only did so in small-scale conversations and not in front of the whole class, nor did I spend much time situating or troubling my own “dilemma of inheritance” for the students. I could narrate my own experience learning – but not living – the kinds of discrimination and displacement that our research explored without my intellectual authority or legitimacy in the classroom being questioned.

Such moments “cash in” on privilege in ways that may be in tension with the goals of my project, and I see significant limitations in my assignment sequence as well. Some of these are probably intractable in a department that places so much focus on distinct, dis-connected academic essays in early composition classes. Be that as it may, because my students were not expected to produce some kind of public project that ever risked being in conversation with the greater university, none of us ever had to grapple with public receptions or criticism of our ideas. To the degree that these questions are understood as private assignments about the isolated past, then they may be in tension with my goals to work as an ally toward significant, anti-racist institutional change and to design class work that potentially contributes to that change. I could imagine that organizing a public forum, much like the one Lora E. Vess has described, might be one way to extend and develop this project (117). Additionally, I am reminded that advocating for broader understandings of “acceptable” projects and diverse ways to meet student outcomes is a site of the politics of the university, and so therefore should also be one of the takeaways of this discussion.

By the end of the unit, students had learned that their institution has a history beneath the celebratory stories of expansion and integration. Perhaps even more importantly, students had the chance to grapple with how to account for that history. My students from Bowling Green and greater

Warren County, KY, reported that this this project doubly “hit home” in that our project changed not just their sense of campus, but of their hometown. As Su Meh wrote, “[Growing up in Bowling Green] I have heard many stories about segregation, slavery, and civil rights involving African-Americans, but one thing I did not know is that where I am standing on campus, as a student of Western Kentucky University, is a place someone once called home” (1). Haley Flowers decided to explore the limits of her own knowledge even further:

At first, I thought maybe I didn’t know about Jonesville because I was white. I started speaking to [family friend] Elise about Jonesville, but she had never heard of such a thing. I started to explain what Jonesville was and why it is no longer here. Mind you, Elise is African American, and she had absolutely no knowledge of Jonesville. While explaining everything to her, she makes these awful faces because she had no idea. She mentioned ‘After all of what you just told me, I let my son continue his education at Western. I’m glad he doesn’t go there anymore!’ This is a huge game-changer for most people. Western should let everyone know the truth behind their university being built. (6-7)

Seeing students take course content and using it their own lives, as Flowers does here, should be a significant mark of success for any teacher, and I am especially glad that students from here in Warren County could use our course to make connections with their lives in organic, practical, and potentially political ways.

Students also took this project as an invitation to think expansively about the institution as it stands today. Anatasia Phillips and Frederick Shute both indicated interest in exploring the way that a PWI could literally spring from the demolition of a Black neighborhood. For these students, our work together opened lines of inquiry that complicated the hegemonic stories of easy and frictionless integration of the university, especially hearing firsthand stories from community members at the African American Museum. In the course of their research, students unearthed stories of Black students admitted to the university but banned from living in dormitories, eating in cafeterias, or parking on campus; others students took interest in the diminishing enrollments of African American students at WKU and criticized low levels of support for minority and first-generation students. While these anecdotes are not directly related to the story of Jonesville, I observed a number of students beginning to take seemingly disparate “facts” and working to connect them. I count it as a great pedagogical success when students make such connections where before there were none. On a few occasions, these interests spilled over to the next paper assignment, and students developed essays calling for structural reforms such as free or significantly-reduced tuition for African American students from the region as well as significantly more academic and social support for African American students who choose to attend WKU.

To Teach the University is to Teach Reparations

While this project hewed closely to the particular contours of our university’s history, it is not so unique that it could not take shape in a number of different courses at a range of different kinds of universities. As scholars such as Georg Lipsitz and Mindy Fullilove have shown, from 1949 to 1970 urban renewal projects around the country displaced over 1600 African American communities. As opposed to the common narratives of broad shifts in the workforce, the development of Pell Grants, or the availability of federal research funding streams, the post-war expansion of the American university is also conditioned by the destructive, harmful, and often racist “development” projects of urban renewal. As scholars such as Sharon Harr and Davarian L. Baldwin have shown, the truth is that numerous public and private universities have a history – a history that is very much ongoing – of displacing African Americans and creating predominantly White residential enclaves in what were previously Black neighborhoods. Much of the work, and perhaps rightly so, has focused on metropolitan areas like Chicago. Hopefully, our project here at WKU can come alongside the work of Mia Taylor, Sophie Kahler, Connor Harrison, and others who are creating a critical archive of the ways that universities around the country have used urban renewal projects to fund expansions and displace African Americans. All that said, I do not think that casting a critical eye at urban renewal projects *per se* is essential to this project, nor should this be mistaken for a necessary component for others who wish to develop what Ball and Lai call “critical, place-based” projects with reference to their own institutional contexts. Put generally, I hope that this article demonstrates one more example of what it looks like when we articulate anti-racist concerns with a commitment to “teach the university” in order to frame course content.

In a quotation often cited in composition studies, David Bartholomae writes that each time a student sits down to write an essay, she has to “invent the university.” While Bartholomae is concerned with academic discourse, critical university studies scholars tend to take Bartholomae more literally. In a striking revision of Bartholomae’s claim, Heather Steffen has recently argued that there is great possibility for students and faculty who develop projects that dwell in the space “before the university’s invention is a *fait accompli*, when we encounter the university as an unfinished institution and when we might ‘dare to speak’ what we want from it” (20). By looking at historical examples of expansion, development, and growth of the university, one thing we are able to do is name those moments when the university reveals itself to be unfinished. And in those moments, we must summon the clarity and commitment to criticize any narrative of the university that denies the fact that it has been built on the unequal bestowing of advantage to some by way of injury to others. In the case of my university, the former residents of Jonesville deserve a commitment on the part of the institution to atone for their neighborhood’s destruction. Put simply, it could have been different. By daring to speak how things could have been different in the past – to borrow a formulation from Roy L. Brooks – we

attempt to right a heavy wrong in order to make the present and future university more racially harmonious. Here at WKU, my students have voiced – as have many students around the country – that accountability and reparations are what they want out of their university, and I think we should take them as seriously as any of the other scholars and activists I have cited here. At least at my institution, to teach the university is to teach reparations, and I hope that this article can contribute to a broad and nationwide movement to reckon with each and every university’s “dilemma of inheritance.”

Guiding Questions for Instructors:

- What other lives have lived here, and where have they gone?
- Knowing that this university has neither always existed here nor has magically appeared on this place, what can we learn about who was displaced for it to grow and expand?
- Urban Renewal projects ran from roughly 1949-1970. During this period, how does your institution change? Are there new buildings, stadiums, or infrastructure projects erected during this period?
- Does your university have librarians or archivists who could help source primary documents for students to engage?
- Are there elders in your community with living memories of communities that lived where the university now occupies? How could their stories trouble the narratives that the university cultivates?

Looking for texts to introduce and frame the question of reparations? Try these:

- Nikole Hannah-Jones, "What Is Owed" – published in the *NY Times Magazine* in wake of the murder of George Floyd and amidst the uprising of 2020, this article offers a clear and concise argument for economic reparations for Black people in the US
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations" – published in the *Atlantic* in 2014, Coates focuses on redlining and contract home-buying in Chicago in order to illuminate a legacy of injury to Black people from enslavement to the present
- Ways and Means Podcast, Feb 19, 2020, "Reparations: How It Could Happen" – in this podcast produced by Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, leading reparations scholar William A. "Sandy" Darity discusses the topic with host Emily Hanford (~20 minutes)
- Moyers and Company video, May 21, 2014, "Facing the Truth: The Case for Reparations" – Bill Moyers interviews Ta-Nehisi Coates in a wide-ranging discussion of reparations that hews closely to Coates's piece in the *Atlantic* (~24 minutes)

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