

“HOW DOES A CITY RADICALLY CHANGE?”

ROSE M. BREWER, PH.D.*

- I. INTRODUCTION TO RACECRAFT AND THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION WORKING GROUP—MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA
 - A. *Conceptual and Historical Underpinnings*
- II. CONSTITUTING THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION WORKING GROUP
- III. RACECRAFT IN MINNEAPOLIS AND THE STATE OF MINNESOTA
- IV. WHO GETS TO TELL THE STORY?
- V. RACECRAFT IN MINNESOTA: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND WHITENESS AS PROPERTY
 - A. *White Settlerism, Whiteness as Property, and Genocide*
 - B. *Into the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*
- VI. BEYOND HISTORICAL CONTEXT SETTING TO THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION WORKING GROUP PROCESS TODAY
- VII. CONCLUSION

“Racecraft originates not in nature but in human action and imagination. It can exist in no other way.”¹

* Dr. Rose M. Brewer is an activist scholar and Morse Alumni Distinguished Teaching Professor of African American & African Studies, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. She writes extensively on gender, race, class, Black radicalism and political change, publishing over 80 articles, book chapters and essays. She’s written several co-edited volumes, including the award-winning book, *The Color of Wealth*. She is a University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts Dean’s Medalist, member of the Academy of Distinguished Teachers, recipient of the American Sociological Association Distinguished Teaching award and the Josie Johnson Social Justice Award. She was recently elected President of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP).

¹ KAREN E. FIELDS & BARBARA J. FIELDS, RACECRAFT: THE SOUL OF INEQUALITY IN AMERICAN LIFE 15 (2012).

I. INTRODUCTION TO RACECRAFT AND THE TRUTH AND
RECONCILIATION WORKING GROUP—MINNEAPOLIS,
MINNESOTA

My mind is on Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the hundreds of other cities in which Black lives rose up in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in rebellion against racism, economic injustice, and police violence. Millions stood up. Minneapolis sparked a global protest in 2020 in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.² It has been three full years since that public lynching when policeman Derek Chauvin squeezed the life out of Mr. Floyd with a knee on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds.³ In the context of the uprisings that followed in the aftermath of the Floyd rebellion, the questions remain: “Why Minneapolis?” and “How does a city—in the vortex of the demands for justice—radically change?” The term radical goes to the heart of the questions raised in this Article and to the root causes of social injustice in Minneapolis. The Minneapolis Truth and Reconciliation Working Group was called into existence to confront the complicated issues around race, violence, inequality, and whether authorizing a Truth and Reconciliation (“T & R”) process was the path to justice.⁴ The Working Group would contend with building a difficult and complicated road in order to reach a series of recommendations on whether to move forward with a T & R Commission in Minneapolis.

A. *Conceptual and Historical Underpinnings*

Much needs to be made visible about the desirability of a T & R process in Minneapolis. The question of whether a Truth & Reconciliation Commission would be able to catalyze change was a key concern of the

² The Floyd protests were local, national and international with more than 20 million people marching for Black Lives Matter. See Evan Hill et al., *How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody*, N.Y. TIMES (May 31, 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html> [<https://perma.cc/6VRN-UFZW>].

³ Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, *8 Minutes, 46 Seconds Became a Symbol in George Floyd’s Death. The Exact Time Is Less Clear*, N.Y. TIMES (June 18, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/george-floyd-timing.html> [<https://perma.cc/ZF8A-DP8K>].

⁴ The Minneapolis City Council approved the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Working Group on October 14, 2020. See generally Angelika Schlunck, *Truth and Reconciliation Commissions*, 4 ISLA J. INT’L & COMPAR. L., 415 (1998).

“HOW DOES A CITY RADICALLY CHANGE?”

Working Group. The record of other efforts had been mixed. Then there was the challenging racial history of the city of Minneapolis: the historical underpinnings of police murder, white supremacy, and antiblackness in Minneapolis are core to the structure of the city and state.⁵ Could these deeply rooted issues be addressed by such a Commission? This is the North. This is the city in the cold Upper Midwest touted for its liberalness. The question of how Minneapolis resides in this “liberalness,” professes it, and yet has some of the worst racial disparities in the nation is a serious matter.⁶ The Working Group knew the disjuncture between word and deed needed to be critically unpacked. Before the murder of George Floyd, a good deal was hidden below the surface about Minneapolis—“The City of Lakes”—and racial inequalities. Even before the Floyd uprising, serious questions loomed about structural racism and the ugly racial disparities that characterized the City.⁷ The question was, how does a city radically change when structural transformation demands moving outside the liberal comfort zone? This story of the Minneapolis T & R Working Group is a window into some of the transformation that must occur and must be confronted for radical change to happen. Indeed, there is a deeper story to be told, requiring real truth telling. I began stitching together that story as a member of the T & R Working Group. The process kicked into gear in October 2020. On October 14, 2020, the Minneapolis City Council unanimously adopted a resolution calling for the exploration of a truth and reconciliation process through the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁸

⁵ See generally WILLIAM GREEN, *A PECULIAR IMBALANCE: THE FALL AND RISE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY IN MINNESOTA* (2007).

⁶ *The ‘Minnesota Paradox’: Why the State Has One of the Largest Racial Disparities*, WCCO CBS NEWS MINN. (June 23, 2020, 10:46 PM), <https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/the-minnesota-paradox-why-the-land-of-10000-lakes-has-one-of-the-largest-racial-disparities/> [<https://perma.cc/6ZVC-VYPE>].

⁷ See Randy Furst, *Beyond the Great Recession*, STAR TRIB., Mar. 23, 2011, at 1A, available at LEXIS, News Library, <Beyond the Great Recession> File (explaining that, for the past decade, increasing attention has been given to the Minnesota racial disparities in every arena from housing to education and that these disparities are repeatedly referred to as some of worst in the nation).

⁸ The Working Group would research, discuss, and make recommendations about the possibility of a Beyond the Great Recession.docx T & R Commission in the City of Minneapolis. Joy Marsh Stephens, *Update from Truth and Reconciliation Workgroup (RCA-2021-00767)*, MINNEAPOLIS LEGIS. INFO. MGMT. SYS. (June 30, 2021), <https://lims.minneapolismn.gov/RCA/8236> [<https://perma.cc/3SVX-A5P3>] (choose “Truth and Reconciliation Workgroup Presentation” under attachments) [hereinafter *Truth and Reconciliation Workgroup*].

II. CONSTITUTING THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION WORKING GROUP

By November 18, 2020, I was formally invited by Vice City Council Chair Andrea Jenkins to join the T & R Working Group. Our work would begin in January 2021. The group of fifteen members represented a cross section of American Indian (the preferred nomenclature for the Indigenous representatives on the committee) and Black/African (the preferred nomenclature for Black or African descendants) community members, scholars, historians, and leaders. The George Floyd uprising was the main catalyst for moving the idea of a T & R process forward. Nonetheless, the settler colonial reality of the state and the city required the work group to examine the historical realities as well. The experiences of American Indian and Black/African descendants anchored the process.⁹ The charge of the T & R Working Group was to consider what it would take for a T & R process to occur in Minneapolis. The several months long effort superseded the idea that process would take about five meetings. This seriously underestimated the complexity of the process the Working Group was embarking on. By June of 2021, the Working Group's work was presented in a set of recommendations to the Minneapolis City Council. The Working Group's recommendation was that the city proceed with establishing a formal T & R Commission. The underpinnings of the Working Group's process and recommendations are discussed in this Article.

While far from simple, the Minneapolis T & R Working Group grappled with the policies, politics, and practices which shape the social realities of Black/African descendants and American Indians in the City of Minneapolis. The imperative of the T & R Working Group initiative should be understood in the context of the racial/class/settler colonial history of Minnesota and Minneapolis. Of course, the looming shadow over our work was the police murder of George Floyd: murdered by cop Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020.¹⁰ The meta question the Working Group grappled with was, "why and how must T & R be articulated in Minneapolis?" The complexities of establishing a Commission were an ongoing discussion of the Working

⁹ Both American Indian and African/Black descendants would be the groups represented. These populations have faced deeply rooted structural racism, settler colonialism, land expropriation, and genocide in the State of Minnesota and City of Minneapolis.

¹⁰ See Bogel-Burroughs, *supra* note 1.

“HOW DOES A CITY RADICALLY CHANGE?”

Group. The Group knew that better understanding the historical and structural underpinnings of what had transpired in the city and state regarding Black/African descendants and was central to its decisionmaking. We needed a deeper analysis of the history of race in Minnesota and the city of Minneapolis. Our questions could not be fully addressed until we got a critical sense of our mutual and distinct histories and the legacies and realities in play.

III. RACECRAFT IN MINNEAPOLIS AND THE STATE OF MINNESOTA

Historian Barbara Fields and sociologist Karen Fields contend that racecraft is a social practice.¹¹ Racecraft takes for granted the objective reality of race.¹² Indeed, the frame is an important lens for conceptualizing what the Working Group embarked upon in the multi-month T & R determination process in Minneapolis. The multiple interrogations we engaged in around what meanings and history we brought were ongoing. There was no blank slate, and we had to contend with our own positionalities. We grew to understand that, as Fields and Fields argue, it is in the constant making and remaking of racecraft that it persists.¹³ The constant making and remaking of race and racism underpins the Minneapolis reality. It is a sturdy way to think about the Minneapolis T & R Working Group’s analytical work. It is in the recognition and naming of white racism in a professedly liberal city and state that expresses the constitutive nature of racecraft in Minneapolis. What was not so well understood by the working group was how deeply rooted and slippery the process would be. Bringing together the distinct and overlapping terrains of Indigenous and African descendant complexities taught us much, but it was challenging. The strategic question of which recommendations and how the process would unfold were answered in a series of hard conversations that we had as group members. Without a unified strategic vision, it was not surprising that the slippery mechanisms of recommending the way forward would be challenging terrain. That vision had to be forged.

¹¹ See FIELDS & FIELDS, *supra* note 1, at 25.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ See generally *Id.*