Defending Weelaunee Forest: A Case Study of the Effectiveness of Peacebuilding Through Community Efforts

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*Abstract:* LaCore offers a reflection on creating their poem “Ode to Weelaunee Forest [Protectors]”. This poem addresses the conflict surrounding the development of “Cop City” within the Weelaunee Forest. The poem is constructed in a similar format like a cento poem where words or phrases are taken from other poems and made into a collage of words.

*Keywords:* Weelaunee Forest, Cop City, intersectional conflict analysis, art, arts approaches to conflict, Agnes Scott College

**Ode to Weelaunee Forest [Protectors]**

Take only pictures,
Leave only footprints.
Leave it better than you found it.

To *Love* and to be *Loved,*
We deserve to be flowers
admired for our beauty and loved for simply existing.

Give me something to live for,
Invest in our compassion.
I wish we could all get along, like we used to back in-

*Clear* backpacks *march* past *frigid* metal detectors.
*Thick* textbooks *provide* an *extra measure of security,*
*Rather than sufficient education.*

Pigs are *Haram*
Calling cops pigs is *offensive* to pigs.

*Fuck* 12.
Cop City will *never* be built.
Community building is a central aspect for understanding how to foster conversations of peace and non-violence not only at a local level, but on a national and global one as well. Many research studies have affirmed the assumption that community spaces, like public gardens and parks, have had many positive impacts on the neighborhoods in which they are located. These areas are often generated as a means of connecting neighbors, resulting in the gathering together of multiple identities in neutral spaces for people to form collective identities and initiate methods of building respect and tolerance for others. In my final project I sought to understand how the politicization and privatization of these spaces in America, and more specifically Atlanta, Georgia is a technique used by institutions to suppress community engagement and prevent the existence of safe and secure spaces which could then possibly lead to the degradation or inability of grassroots movements to form and gain the traction needed to invoke change.

To comprehensively expand upon these topics, I will be employing peacebuilding concepts such as waging conflict nonviolently, transforming relationships, and de-mechanization to better understand how citizens have gone about peacefully protesting the invasion of the public sphere. The research topic at hand, seeks to explore how violence is being enacted upon and therefore effects these peace-building spaces, I will investigate how some community spaces such as public
parks and community gardens have been targeted by government offices and other institutions of power to threaten efforts by activists and other community members’ abilities to continue serving and providing for these spaces. When focusing specifically on the current case of the Atlanta Police Department’s goal to demolish Weelaunee Forest, a public park in the Metro-Atlanta area, in order “to turn 300 acres of forest into a tactical training compound featuring a mock city,” it is evident that this space was chosen not only because it is a vast plot of land, but because community spaces aren’t valued by institutions of oppression.¹

The Atlanta Police Department is an example of an institution that is trying to deconstruct this landscape while also attempting to actively erase the very identities of the community members who are trying to protect it. I believe focusing on the Metro-Atlanta area will sufficiently support my assertion because of the variety of marginalized identities that live within this geographic location. It is also important to note that the destruction of these spaces happens most in areas of non-white, underprivileged neighborhoods, which further adds to the notion of intentional targeting. These community members share identities such as being racially marginalized, belonging to gender minorities, being disabled, or being economically disadvantaged, along with other traits deemed ‘undesirable’ by the current status quo. According to the 2022 U.S Census Bureau, the Black population is currently the largest racial demographic in Atlanta, making up 48% of citizens’ identities.² Thus, there is a connection to be uncovered between the desire to increase police presence and encourage their militarization through the development of training facilities and the desire to eliminate and drive out unwanted populations that hold authority and significance because of their strength in numbers and community.

To begin deepening my analysis, I will start by dissecting some of the reasons that community gardens are beneficial and should remain under the protection of the public sphere, as well as contrasting this argument with the threat of privatization. The privatization of community spaces for capitalistic gain preys upon marginalized people who benefit from the free resources provided in these public spheres, such as vegetables and fruits which positively contributes to helping members save money and access foods not readily available in areas that suffer from food apartheid. Additionally, while community gardens aren’t exclusive to marginalized communities, and exist in privileged communities as well, there are greater benefits for those who cannot financially afford the increases in grocery-store prices and who suffer from lack of healthy nourishment which is not due to their own choices. This is an example of the systemic inequity faced by marginalized people, in which certain obstacles are put in place to prevent them from accessing the same resources as their more privileged counterparts. The creation of these gardens can be acknowledged as a method of peacebuilding known as ‘transforming relationships.’ This can be defined as efforts to center relationship building through collective healing (such as gardening together) and “give people opportunities to create long term, sustainable solutions to address their needs.”³

Another form of community building can be found in public parks, which are notable because these very spaces challenge capitalists’ notions of exclusivity with their existence. Since those who have lower economic status do not have the privilege of disposable income to spend on renting or buying out space to commune, these non-exclusive public areas give many chances

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¹ “Defend the Atlanta Forest.” https://defendlhetatlaneforest.org/.
² Census.gov 2022.
³ Shank and Schirch 2008.
to still experience community and nature. Unfortunately, these public spaces are already being impeded upon in ‘small’ yet significant ways such as anti-homeless structures on park benches and under bridge passings in which house-less people seek protection and temporary shelter. Journalist Charles Bethea reports that the A.P.D training facility is estimated “to cost around ninety million dollars, with a third of that money coming from public funds, and the rest coming from the Atlanta Police Foundation.”

It can be argued that this money could be being utilized instead to provide more secure temporary housing for those in need, rather than being spent on militant luxuries and the aforementioned anti-homeless infrastructure. Some members of the public that would argue this assertion are protestors who identify themselves as ‘Atlanta Forest defenders’, and they practice a peacebuilding technique known as ‘waging conflict nonviolently’ in a variety of ways. This term is defined by Micheal Shank and Lisa Schirch as, “nonviolent action aims to raise public awareness and sympathy, increase understanding of how groups in conflict are interdependent, and balance power by convincing or coercing others to accept the needs or desires of all involved.” One of the ways that the forest defenders have been waging conflict nonviolently is through inhabiting encampments in the forest to deter police presence and present images of protest to the public. Their active resistance to the attempts to militarize these spaces indicate that the desires of the public who utilize these spaces does not align with the institutional mode of thought, creating a conflict of interests that has led to the continuance of protests. Most importantly, their consistency and longevity further their peacebuilding methodology by showcasing commitment to the cause.

Lastly, I will be discussing the concept of de-mechanization in relation to the positive implications of relationship building in community spaces. To provide context, de-mechanization can be described as the process of unlearning social constructs and deconstructing notions associated with the status quo. In many instances, the process of integrating spaces with different identities and interacting with individuals from outside one’s own community leads many people to confront their own biases, and since these spaces are not owned by an individual, there is a level of neutrality allowed as a result. I hypothesize that the consequences of negatively politicizing these spaces can result in the removal of areas for ordinary people to gather with families and friends and converse with strangers who share the commonality of being within one location that might hold different cultural connotations for each identity group, which thus prevents opportunities for open-minded dialogue and connection.

This is why, for my poetry piece “Ode to Weelaunee Forest [Protectors]”, I found it important to gather remarks of students and community members around Agnes Scott that I found to be important in a collage. This poem is constructed in a format like a cento poem, where words or phrases are taken from other poems by various poets and made into a collage. I have selected phrases from the Weelaunee Forest Dana Exhibit and put them together to form something new. I am grateful to the individuals who contributed but chose to remain anonymous, for some of the unique phrases they came up with. While some are popular protest chants, others were original creations of Agnes Scott College students. By rearranging various phrases based on their correlation to the cause, my goal was to put popular phrases in conversation with each other and the larger metro-Atlanta community. I also made the creative literary choice to insert

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4 Bethea 2022.
5 Shank and Schirch 2008.
my own voice in pieces of imagery that related back to numerous socio-political issues happening in America more broadly, such as alluding to school shootings, themes of death, because of the aforementioned cause and other readings, and how community spaces are used by average people. By constructing this poem based off the themes discussed in my paper, I was able to position myself in the context of ‘Stop Cop City’ and the Weelaunee forest through an arts-based approach, which I believe has been consistent with the learning concepts we have discussed as a class.

In conclusion, community spaces provide necessary grounds for discourse and their inclusionary efforts must be acknowledged and respected if the goal is to provide community security. However, the destruction of these spaces for profit reflects the true reality that the state and its institutions would rather enforce their dominance for the economic and social gain of the few rather than the many. Nevertheless, there is still hope to be found in combating these notions through strategizing using peacebuilding and arts-based techniques to promote community consciousness and activate members to stand together for the greater good of protecting their home spaces and legacies.

References


