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"There is no political agenda": Governing and contesting the 'compassionate city' in Louisville[1]

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Abstract:

This paper examines the emerging trend for city governments to declare themselves compassionate. Opening up the 'compassionate city' as an object of critical scrutiny, we outline some of the key ways that compassion has been approached in critical scholarship before turning our attention to the politics of these urban commitments to compassion as they are enacted in practice. Focusing on the city of Louisville, where the 'compassionate city' imaginary has been taken on both by politicians and by economic, migrant and racial justice activists, we examine the potential of compassion as and in relation to other political grammars, and consider the polyvalent nature of the compassionate city as it has shaped public debate and political struggle in the city. We argue that this turn toward compassion should be evaluated and understood neither in terms of the good intentions of compassion proponents nor exclusively through analyses that reduce compassion to a single logic to be critiqued, but, instead, in terms of its contingent politics. In doing so, we respond to recent debates about the specificity of the political by emphasizing that the meaning of politics and the political grammars through which we understand urban problems are never the province of critical scholarship alone, and we highlight the value of approaches that can sensitize us to the ways that politics—and its meaning—can itself become a problem as the political nature of the compassionate city is called into question.

Key words:

urban governance, contentious and non-contentious politics, compassion, urban entrepreneurialism, racial and economic justice, Louisville

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I. Introduction

In a range of cities across the world, the 'compassionate city' has emerged as an imaginary meant to inform urban policy-making, planning and city life more generally (e.g., Donovan 2017; Lyles et al. 2018). As one manifestation of this trend, cities from Seattle to Louisville and Monterrey to Rotterdam have joined approximately 90 others to affirm an international Charter for Compassion and, as a part of that affirmation, developed plans to make their respective cities more compassionate. This interest in compassion emerges amidst ongoing restructuring of state involvement in welfare regimes, unfolding crises for migrants—that are also often imagined as crises for cities or nation-states—and longstanding patterns of injustice at the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality that structure individual cities and stretch beyond them to the uneven distributions of wealth, violence and precarity that characterize the contemporary world (Davies and Isakjee 2018; Derickson 2017a; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Indeed, in the United States, which has been a central, but not exclusive, location of cities affirming the charter, the empowerment of white supremacist and xenophobic nationalist organizing, the increasing visibility of progressive liberal and left movements around immigrant justice, interfaith anti-Islamophobia and racial justice organizing, and emerging centrist concerns about populism and polarization together form an important context for the politics of urban commitments to compassion. In that context, it is, perhaps, not surprising that a number of political actors have found the idea of compassion appealing, whether due to a perceived absence of compassion in particular policies or politicians or through the promise of compassion as a disposition for responding to polarization.

To better understand the meaning and implications of these urban commitments to compassion, we examine the *politics* of compassion in Louisville, Kentucky, a city often put forward as a model by proponents of compassionate city commitments and where a powerful elected mayor entering his third 4-year term has worked to market Louisville as a compassionate city. In response, the idea of compassion has become an important reference point in struggles over affordable housing, racialized policing, the minimum wage and the city government's relation to federal immigration enforcement agencies, among a range of others. Drawing on interviews with compassion proponents and with activists making claims on local institutions and governments in Louisville, as well as a range of published materials, we show how compassion, as a governing imaginary, supplements a 'there is no alternative' urban entrepreneurial agenda in ways that tend toward supporting existing relations of power and inequality in the city, even as the discourse of compassion is contested and counter-mobilized by migrant, racial, economic and housing justice activists.

In doing so, we speak to theoretical debates about the postpolitical and the broader questions about the specificity of politics to which those discussions have been joined (Beveridge and Koch 2017; Bond et al. 2015; Davidson and Martin 2014; Derickson 2017b; Dikeç and Swyngedouw 2017; Leitner and Strunk 2014; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). We turn to Doshi and Ranganathan's (2017) work on political narrative and to MacLeod and McFarlane's (2014) writing on the "grammars of urban injustice" to emphasize how the frameworks through which we understand urban politics are never the province of critical scholarship alone, and we suggest the value of approaches that can sensitize us to the ways that politics—and its meaning—can itself become a problem as the relation between compassion and politics becomes an object of debate and struggle. As such, we argue that the meaning of the compassionate city can be determined neither in relation to the, likely, benevolent intentions of its advocates nor to scholarly critiques of compassion as a singular logic, but instead emerges as the contingent outcome of political action and claims-making in a plural and uneven world.

II. The Problems of Compassion and of Politics

The Charter for Compassion emerged through a complicated intersection of interfaith activism and philanthrocapitalism. Each year, the TED organization grants a cash prize to "to a leader with a creative, bold wish to spark global change". Winners have included scholars, politicians, NGO leaders and celebrity activists, including Bill Clinton, Bono and Jamie Oliver. In 2008, the prize was awarded to public religion scholar, Karen Armstrong, whose project was to create an international Charter for Compassion. The charter document was completed in 2009 and has been financially supported by the Fetzer Institute. Included among the charter's board of directors and advisory compassion council are religious leaders, academics, activists, as well as CEOs, business "innovators", an "angel investor", and a number of individuals involved with various forms of 'corporate social responsibility' and 'social entrepreneurship'.

The charter opens by asserting that "the principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves" (CCI 2009). The emphasis on compassion as shared among a wide variety of religious and ethical traditions points to the interfaith orientation of the charter, and much of the charter's text speaks from and to religious communities about the role of religion and morality in human relations and public life (see Figure 1). In that sense the charter can, in the first instance, be understood as a political intervention within a field of religious discourse arguing for an explicitly non-fundamentalist understanding of religion, for the appreciation of religious diversity, and for the extension of empathy even to those who some might consider enemies. Here, a post-September 11th political environment marked by concerns about Islamophobia and about the problem of 'religious extremism' is a key context. Taking the first sentence of the charter as a guide, compassion seems meant to suggest a way of treating others "without exception, with absolute justice, equity, and respect" (CCI 2009). While the details are not fully elaborated, this is manifestly intended not only as an individual moral injunction, but as a disposition or a practice "indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community" (CCI 2009).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1 The Charter for Compassion text (https://charterforcompassion.org/charter/charter-overvew)

Since 2009, more than 90 cities have affirmed the charter and participate in the charter's compassionate communities' program. This includes at least 50 cities in the United States, as well as cities around the world with particular concentrations in Mexico (8), Indonesia (7), Canada (4) and the Netherlands (4). The concrete implications of becoming a 'compassionate city' are quite varied. Unlike, for example, the World Charter for the Right to the City, there is no detailed list of provisions awaiting institutionalization. Unlike the declaration of 'sanctuary city' status that, in the U.S., aims at specific policy changes limiting cooperation between municipal governments and federal immigration authorities, there is no definitive policy shift that accompanies a city declaring itself compassionate. Instead, the charter operates as a kind of indeterminate vision statement meant to help galvanize, but not determine in advance, actions that create a more compassionate world. Indeed, the arguments about religion so central to the charter text itself are not always particularly central to compassionate city projects—although religiously-affiliated social justice and interfaith organizations do often play important roles. At least as prominent among compassionate city proponents are references to contemporary developments in neuroscience, psychology and management theory (e.g. Seppälä et al. 2017), humanitarian rationalities (cf. Mitchell 2017) and

befitting the Charter's origin in the TED prize, what Anand Giridharadas (2018) calls 'market-friendly, winner-safe' models of social change. There are also significant differences among cities about the extent to which these commitments to compassion result from relatively more 'top down' or 'bottom up' initiative, in the sense of starting from city politicians, civil servants, or relatively more 'grassroots' efforts. For all of these reasons, the significance of affirming the charter varies from city to city, with some municipal governments passing largely symbolic resolutions, quickly forgotten after the next election, if not sooner. For others, however, the discourse of compassion seems to gain wider purchase with more observable consequences, as we will show in the case of Louisville.

Problematizing compassionate urbanism

In the face of broader political economies producing enormous inequality and entrenched regimes of racialization, gender and sexuality that perpetually render some vulnerable to violence and precarity (e.g., Gilmore 2002; Peck 2012; Rosenberg 2017; Shabazz 2015), compassion can seem an inadequate response. More than just inadequacy, the logic of compassion may itself posit and reinforce unequal relations between the subject and object of compassion (see Garber 2004), and it is not hard to see how compassion sits uneasily with analytics focused on structural or political antagonisms. Compassion and neoliberal ideologies and policies can also be quite compatible.[2] In work on faith communities, scholars caution that congregations grapple with "the countervailing ethical demands of compassion and moral rectitude" (Bartowski and Regis 2003: 3); narratives of compassion and self-help (Hackworth 2010); and the paradox of compassion and accountability (Omri 2008). Each of these dialectics that co-exist with compassion suggest reciprocal obligations on the part of the recipients. These reciprocal obligations are easily tied to neoliberal ideologies of self-help, even as Staeheli (2013) reminds that the politics of obligation are necessarily polyvalent. Compassion is similarly polyvalent, which can be seen in the range of orientations that can be implied by those mobilizing the term, from an embodied response to exceptional suffering, to a quasi-universalistic ethical injunction along the 'love thy neighbour' lines, to a kind of individualized self-help strategy that can also be scaled up to achieve a more productive and profitable workplace. Among this multiplicity, there are, as well, proposals for more collective and more politicized forms of compassion (Waite, Valentine and Lewis 2014) and there are aspects of public thinking about compassion that share affinities with feminist approaches to a politics of care and unevenly shared vulnerability—though frequently in comparatively less coherent ways than one finds in feminist work (e.g. Held 2006; Lawson 2009; Lyles et al. 2018 also make this connection).

Within the literatures on urban politics and governance in the U.S., compassion has most often been explicitly addressed in the context of homelessness management and dialectical relationships of 'care and control' or 'care and criminalization' that are often at work there (Hennigan and Speer 2018; Sparks 2012). For example, Stacey Murphy (2009) shows how 'compassionate' modes of service provision around homelessness in San Francisco have worked to entrench exclusion and marginalization. She argues that the post-revanchist city "gives rise to deeply ambivalent new benevolence evident in a variety of new urban policies at the city-level, including

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[2] The relation between neoliberalism, itself a complex and contestable term, and compassion, is obviously a complicated affair (cf. Williams et al. 2012). Our point here is primarily to acknowledge that there are potential affinities, and, in line with our broader argument, not to suggest a necessary or inherent connection. In our references to the term neoliberal, we acknowledge the term's "slipperiness," yet follow Springer, Birchand and MacLeavy in saying that "when we make reference to neoliberalism, we are generally referring to the new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility" (2016: 2).

‘compassionate’ attempts to manage urban poverty” (Murphy 2009: 311). These policies are presented as compassionate in order to appeal to a local progressive political culture, but Murphy demonstrates what this compassion can conceal. The program she examines, “Care not Cash,” creates new definitions of the deserving poor, new institutional mechanisms of regulation, and marginalizes the homeless in ways that “are obscured by the language of compassion” (Murphy 2009: 306).

Not unlike the ‘creative’ city or the ‘smart’ city, we argue that compassionate city imaginary, where it has been taken up, can operate to consolidate support for particular development agendas and political priorities, even as it shapes the kinds of questions and issues that are seen as relevant or important in a city. However, rather than replacing or even competing with existing urban governance imperatives, at least as our work in Louisville shows, it may be clearer to suggest that the compassionate city imaginary can work as a kind of supplement to a more ingrained urban entrepreneurial agenda that, as discussed by Davison and Iveson (2015), operates through assertions of necessity (“there is no alternative”). Declaring a city to be compassionate, then, rather than a substantive alternative in itself, *can* be a way to carry on with, or even improve, business-as-usual in a city. In other words, insofar as providing a business-friendly climate for investors continues to be an overarching and seemingly irresistible imperative—a point Louisville’s mayor acknowledges fairly transparently—compassion emerges, in part, as those things that the city can do, when it does not interfere with these structural imperatives, to help vulnerable community members, and that may, whether as city-branding strategy or through the improving quality of life in some broader sense, make a city more attractive in the competition for capital. Taken together, these literatures point toward the importance of understanding the role of compassionate urbanism in the ‘non-contentious’ politics of urban governance through which power is exercised and support for existing arrangements is achieved (cf. Mitchell et al. 2015).

Compassion and the grammars of urban politics

Our examination of the politics of compassion in Louisville thus also speaks to broader debates about the political and its specificities. Indeed, there are compelling reasons, in the critical literatures and in our research in Louisville, for associating compassion with dynamics of depoliticization. For example, Maria Kaika (2017) productively disrupts an assumed opposition between racist xenophobia and compassion qua charity by arguing that each represents “affective but apolitical reactions of people who turned from active citizens (caring for political life and common affairs) into… private individuals caring only for their private affairs, through the need to find increasingly complex forms of personal compensation for the erosion of collective welfare provision” (1279). While literatures on postpolitics productively point to the dangers of market rationalities and technocratic logics effectively taking over space for political contestation (e.g., Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014), work on the post-political city, in the singular, can tend toward instantiating an all-encompassing narrative of post-politicization that does not match the messy realities of governance and politics across an uneven world (Davidson and Iveson 2015; McCarthy 2013). More broadly, the circumscription of politics to the disruption of an otherwise static order—to the extent that these and other trends in recent critical urban scholarship partake in this tendency—can also direct analytical attention away from political projects that appear less disruptive (Bond et al 2015; Larner 2014), occlude from view the problem of how governing orders are constructed and maintained (Mitchell et al 2015), and privilege dramatic moments of change and, in practice, often a limited set of political actors and forms, at the expense of both everyday actions and contestation occurring within governing regimes (Darling 2014; Ehrkamp and Jacobsen 2015; Temenos 2017). Of course, those who would define the political in relation to disruption do not

thereby necessarily discount the importance of other kinds of politics or of understanding how governing orders are maintained, even if they might need different terms to talk about them. Indeed, their project is often oriented toward recuperating, as political, actions and claims that, happening outside of or in opposition to institutionally recognized forms of politics, are too often dismissed as apolitical (Dikeç 2017). At the same time, those insisting on more contextually grounded or pragmatic definitions of politics are not thereby announcing an opposition to disruptive politics, but rather seeking to account for, rather than take as given, the creation and maintenance of governing orders or to do justice to the plurality of political actors and projects that (in)cohere around any particular problem (Barnett and Bridge 2016; Leitner and Strunk 2014). Without fully resolving these tensions, we operate here from an understanding of politics focused on action and claims-making around problems of collective importance in the context of plurality and unevenness (cf. Barnett 2017; Häkli and Kallio 2014; Ruez 2016). Rather than privileging contestation or disruption as such, we understand the *contestability* of political claims and the *disruptability* of political orders as calling forth a range of responses, including contestation and disruption, but also building solidarities, negotiating diverging interests, or defending a particular consensus. In some sense, this places us quite closely to 'method of equality' developed in Davidson and Iveson's (2015) engagement with Jacques Rancière's writing on politics, although we would tend to see the logic of equality and the focus on dissensus articulated there as one kind of politics—a crucial kind—that exists among a range of others.

These theoretical conversations about politics are necessarily imbricated with the grammars through which political claims-making is pursued more broadly, as Derickson (2017b) points out by noting how some iterations of these debates tend to take on characteristics of well-worn arguments pitting reformist political strategies against revolutionary ones. MacLeod and McFarlane (2014: 858) also suggest as much when they argue that grammars of urban injustice "are as much about praxis as they are about debate over the merit of particular terms." We understand grammars, as defined by MacLeod and MacFarlane, to be "the ways in which we organize and deploy our critical thinking and languages to elucidate and assess urban injustice and justice" (2014: 858). In that sense, compassion can also be understood as a political grammar insofar as it is used as a framework through which to understand problems and make political claims. We approach compassion talk in Louisville in ways epistemologically analogous to Doshi and Ranganathan's (2017) examination of 'corruption talk' in their study of urban political narrative in Mumbai and Bangalore. They find in narratives of corruption "a structure of feeling that is not simply concocted by left activists but rather forms a more general discursive-affective terrain that traverses multiple social positionalities and fields" (Doshi and Ranganathan 2017: 188). We similarly see compassion talk as a "malleable and morally charged discursive field" that is not limited to, often, relatively centrist proponents of compassion, but moves across a range of socio-political positions—from the figure of the 'compassionate conservative' to those articulating more radical claims (184). This allows us to approach compassion, politics, and the relationship between compassion and politics in a dialogical way, examining how various political grammars are invoked and evaluated by political actors in the city, as well as how the meaning of politics itself become important to struggles around the compassionate city in Louisville.

III. Governing through compassion in Louisville

Located on the northern edge of the U.S. South, with a population of just under 620,000 residents, Louisville, like many U.S. cities, is marked by deeply entrenched patterns of racial and economic injustice. In 2011, Louisville's metro government, at the urging of the then new mayor, Greg Fischer, affirmed the Charter for Compassion and embarked on a '10-year campaign' to make

the city more compassionate. Fischer, a centrist Democrat recently elected to his third term in office, has since made the language of compassion central to his agenda, and has been a significant booster of urban commitments to compassion within Louisville and in national media and urban policy circles (Board 2017; Fischer 2015; Matthew 2017). In that sense, the development of the agenda to make Louisville a 'compassionate city', perhaps, *the* compassionate city, is oriented both introspectively toward achieving certain changes within the city and extrospectively toward exporting the compassionate city idea elsewhere (cf. Temenos and McCann 2012, McCann 2013). Alongside and influencing the local government's actions, there has been the Partnership for a Compassionate Louisville, which has organized activities with and independently of the city government, and lists as its partners a wide range of schools, places of worship, non-profit social service agencies and locally influential Louisville-based corporations including the fast food conglomerate Yum! Brands, UPS and Brown-Forman.

Our research suggests that the declaration of Louisville's compassionate city status should largely *not* be understood as a break with the governing agendas that had shaped the city previously. Instead, in the time since 2011, we largely see a continuation of the city government's pursuit of capital, investment and jobs by an economic development-focused political coalition led by centrist democratic politicians and business interests analyzed by Savitch, Tsukamoto and Vogel (2008).[3] This coalition works through a formal governance structure that affords the mayor's office significant power vis-à-vis the city's legislative body, called the metro council, and creates a relatively permeable boundary between political and economic centres of power, exemplified in the formal linkages and informal networks that connect Greater Louisville, Inc. (the local chamber of commerce) and the local government (Savitch and Vogel 2004; Savitch et al. 2008). Indeed, the city's mayor consistently articulates the relationship between compassion and attracting investment. During a recent trip to India as part of a Strong Cities Network program focused on the role of local governments in countering 'violent extremism', Fischer touted compassion as a reason to invest in Louisville:

> "Our focus on compassion is something that resonates worldwide and is so relevant in today's world… And I always welcome the chance to tell our city's story to potential investors and business interests that may be looking to expand in the U.S." (Elahi 2018).

In this way, compassionate city commitments can supplement urban entrepreneurial agendas through some of the same mechanisms of modelling and circulation that have been examined in broader research on urban policy mobilities (cf. Ward 2011).

This aspect of the compassionate city idea was echoed in an interview with a member of the Partnership for a Compassionate Louisville, who discussed how Computershare, a transnational financial services firm, had recently expanded its operations in Louisville:

> There was a discussion about how heavily they should invest in Louisville because they had a number of options in terms of where they might want to locate, okay. And as it turned out, compassion was one of those things about Louisville that they felt was—that they wanted to be. So wow, Louisville is ahead of other cities.

[3] This coalition, represented by a long-running string of centrist democratic mayors--each often easily elected for multiple terms--is long established, although the consolidation of previously distinct city and county governments, has tended to increase the influence of more conservative and suburban voices since 2003 (Savitch and Vogel 2004).

One could raise questions about the relative weight of the city's commitments to compassion in the decisions of a publicly-traded, transnational corporation, which was also offered tax incentives, but the fact that this narrative circulates among compassion proponents suggests the aspirational quality of the compassionate city project—"Louisville is ahead of other cities"—in, at least in part, urban entrepreneurial terms.

Savitch et al. (2008) point to the crucial fact of Louisville's racial segregation and the existence of political organizing for and against racial justice as significant features of the political landscape that Louisville's governing coalition navigates as it pursues its abiding interest in economic development. However, the city's racialized geographies are not simply a condition that an urban entrepreneurial agenda and governing coalition must navigate; they mutually constitute those agendas and coalitions in important ways, as scholars of racial capitalism have examined in a range of other contexts (Bledsoe and Wright 2018; Derickson 2017a; Pulido 2016; Robinson 2000; Wilson 2000). Thus, we must note that the city's commitment to compassion has similarly *not* marked a significant shift in the racialized geographies of segregation, displacement and incarceration that are fundamental to the city and in which the compassionate city government is implicated in multiple ways. The central role of the city government in policing and incarceration furnishes, perhaps, the most obvious example of this continuity. The mayor's 2017 budget address, where the language of compassion was liberally used, is illustrative. While certain achievements, like increased funding for affordable housing or addiction treatment were touted, the centrepiece of the proposed budget, in terms of where money was being directed, was a significant increase in spending for 'public safety', which largely translates into more funding for the city's police department (Fischer 2017). The persistence of the mutually constitutive imperatives of racial capitalism and urban entrepreneurialism is, perhaps not surprising. Even radical shifts in local government policy would likely need a longer time period to impact such deeply entrenched forces. Nevertheless, the conjunction of compassion talk with increased funding for policing does raise questions about the extent to which the compassionate city may function as a kind of "rhetorical fix" working, whether intentionally or not, to maintain the same agendas that produce the precarity and violence that compassion advocates may want to address (Wilson and Sternberg 2012).

Compassion and the politics of depoliticization

Our discussion of what urban commitments to compassion are not doing—challenging the imperatives of urban entrepreneurialism and racial capitalism—may raise the question of what they do, in fact, produce. In line with the argument made by Mitchell, Attoh and Staeheli (2015: 2633) that "the appearance of post-political consensus, when it occurs, is itself a political achievement, the making of a hegemony, not an explanation", we see the take-up of the compassionate city imaginary as necessarily political and, indeed, playing a role in the construction of governing regimes, even and, perhaps, especially when proponents of compassion themselves may claim an apolitical stance. The compassionate city mission statement posted on the City of Louisville's website insists that the project has "no political agenda":

> "There is *no political agenda*. This effort exists to enable compassionate living to help the citizens of our community reap the benefits that come from living a compassionate life—which are many…. This effort is solely designed to advance compassionate action and will have *no opinion on outside issues*" [our emphasis] (City of Louisville 2011).

These statements raise some important questions. For a number of the activists with whom we spoke, the disavowal of a political agenda rings hollow in the face of a city mayor for whom

compassion is a constant refrain as he pursues a particular vision for the city. Further, given the broad meaning of compassion, it strikes us as difficult to distinguish what issues would be 'outside' compassion. Taking a seemingly contradictory position, Louisville's mayor claimed in his 2017 budget address that "while it doesn't have a line item in this budget, compassion informs the decisions behind each of the investments we make for our citizens" (Fischer 2017). One does not have to doubt the sincerity of the statement in order to see the questions it raises. By making compassion relevant to "each of the investments we make for our citizens," any specific—and contestable—meaning risks getting lost. This very nearly reverses the assertion that commitments to compassion have *no* political agenda, but it is a reversal with very similar effects.

We attempted to clarify the relation between compassion and politics in conversations with several members of the Partnership for a Compassionate Louisville. In those conversations, one participant emphasized the non-partisan nature of project: "We are non-partisan, and that's a really important thing." In this account, the disavowal of politics is relatively circumscribed— reduced to a kind of neutrality vis-a-vis political parties, which is not unusual among a wide range of civil society groups in the U.S., many of which could nevertheless be understood as political in a broader sense of making claims about collective life. Another member of the Partnership for a Compassionate Louisville discussed the early formation of the group and the process of bringing other organizations on board:

> We didn't want to be any kind of a bottleneck, or someone who judges in any way, shape, or form. We didn't want to do anything to diminish what they felt like they wanted to do that was compassion. … why would anybody say you're doing it wrong? So we wanted to make sure that whatever culture we created was positive. In fact, one of our values... was positivity. We didn't want to be in a position where there was something negative going on, and compassion was kind of in the middle of it. So rephrasing or rethinking issues positively turned out to be really our only guiding force.

Proponents describe compassion as a kind of politically neutral "container", enacted through a range of practices—from mindfulness meditation to town hall-style meetings to civic volunteering projects—in which individual subjectivities could be formed, political debates could take place, and organizations could reflect on their priorities and motivating principles. We are not interested in dismissing a moral-pedagogical project promoting compassion as a disposition or practice, and there are angles on that project that merit further inquiry and analysis, in ways partially analogous to how Jeffrey and colleagues (2018) have recently complicated the politics of civility. However, insofar as the idea of compassion is enrolled in the agenda of marketing the city and framing the policy positions of elected officials, compassion talk unavoidably enters in the construction and contestation of governing agendas in the city. In *that* context, at least, the insistence on positivity and neutrality—and the evasion of judgment and 'politics'—have to be understood as themselves political assertions—albeit ones that may work precisely to shore up existing arrangements.

Related concerns were articulated by a local politician with whom we spoke. When we asked about the appeal of the compassionate city idea in Louisville, she suggested that it is taken up, at least in part because, "it's safe":

> There is very little that is controversial about using the word, using the language of compassion, compassionate city. I don't know if it really calls us to do anything, as policy-makers, as decision makers, and I don't know that there's an expectation of us to do more [our emphasis]. On an individual level that's different. On an individual level, there's this expectation that we'll be nice to one another. That's what compassion says to me.

She further explains that compassion can be invoked in ways that do not require more broad scale societal changes that may be viewed as impractical or undesirable by some. Asked about his position in relation to the idea of the compassionate city, the response of an activist in queer and racial justice movements in the city exemplifies a skeptical attitude toward the compassionate city idea:

> I'm not fond of the phrase… I think that, quite frankly, it doesn't manifest through the mayor's actions or his policies. I think it's really just a buzzword. It's soft language they use, but it doesn't really mean much of anything at all.

Characterizing these official commitments to compassion as "soft language", he explains that he does not see compassion in the decisions made by the mayor and goes on to dismiss the idea of the compassionate city as problematically focusing on people's sentiments rather than the effects of their actions. Another activist discussed a particular mechanism through which the city's commitment to compassion could be used to make it more difficult to challenge particular politicians and their policy agendas:

> That's the other thing about compassion for me, is that, if I say 'I'm compassionate', then you can't question me or challenge me on anything. 'That's not compassion. You questioning me or challenging me is not compassionate'.

In this account, that fact that someone like the mayor frames their agendas in terms of compassion makes it more difficult to question or challenge those agendas without being cast as lacking compassion, or having the tone of one's argument or claim questioned. More broadly, she goes on to suggests the importance of not losing sight of alternative political grammars that may more effectively identify and respond to the challenges facing city residents:

> I want us to be thoughtful and careful about using compassion in place of justice, in place of fairness, in place of equity, all those continue to be vital and important goals for us, and I don't know that… for me, compassion is not really there. Compassion doesn't necessarily mean fairness to me. It doesn't necessarily mean equity, and it doesn't necessarily mean justice.

Here she highlights the danger of compassion eclipsing other political grammars that may call for more substantive or radical forms of change, suggesting that compassion cannot and should not replace much needed goals of justice, equity, or fairness.

However, she also goes on to elaborate where a grammar of compassion might usefully inform politics in the city:

> I will say that there are lots of ways it can be used as a positive. Being compassionate around people who have committed crimes. You know, instead of incarcerating people, let's look at restorative justice practices. That's compassion. Compassion toward people who are homeless or who are living in poverty. Compassion means doing the kind of work we need to do to end poverty, to end homelessness. Not to put a band-aid on it. But to end it, period.

Addressing the issues of mass incarceration, homelessness and poverty, her comment indicates that compassion may yet have something to offer as a grammar for approaching and addressing problems in the city. Justice, after all, can be articulated in more punitive ways as well, and even otherwise politically compelling understandings of justice can, at time, fall flat in the face of difference, as feminist work on care has compellingly shown (Staeheli et al. 2012). In that context,

we want to suggest at least the possibility that compassion may have a productive place in and among political grammars, and that the compassionate city—aided, perhaps, by the hesitance of compassion advocates to pin down the meaning of compassion—could function as a kind "strategic essentialism" of the sort that Iveson (2014) identifies, providing some additional traction and resources for movements to end mass incarceration, poverty and homelessness in the city.

IV. Contesting compassion in Louisville

The potential of compassion talk as a political grammar is not hypothetical, but rather something evidently visible in political struggles and critical discourse in the city since 2011. Activists pursuing a wide range of agendas—including, but not limited to, raising the local minimum wage, securing a dedicated funding stream for affordable housing, declaring the city a sanctuary city, and removing statues honouring confederate soldiers from public spaces in the city—integrate language around compassion into their political claims. For example, an activist critical of increasing funding for the police department in the context of mass incarceration and racialized violence, argued in an editorial for a local weekly newspaper that "when Louisville Metro Council votes on the city budget on June 28, it will show whether we are a compassionate city, or a police state" (Sedgwick 2018). We suggest that this mobilization of compassion in claims-making by activists actually points toward something potentially important about the compassionate city imaginary that goes beyond both the individualistic moral-pedagogical project imagined by some of its proponents and the critiques of compassion as neoliberalizing or depoliticizing noted earlier.

We begin with an example from within Louisville's formal political system. In 2014, after a long and heated debate and months of work by activists, the city's metro council passed, and the mayor signed an ordinance that would raise the local minimum wage. With the Republican minority on the council in lockstep opposition to any local increase in the minimum wage, the actual debate on the subject was largely among the Democratic majority about how large the increase should be, with relatively more conservative representatives and the mayor's office advocating for a smaller increase. In these debates, the city's official commitments to compassion were routinely mobilized to make the argument that the minimum wage should be set higher. Representative of these kinds of claims is this quote from then Metro Council representative Attica Scott, "If we are more than words and rhetoric when it comes to being a compassionate city, supporting this minimum wage ordinance from the administration's side is something that to me shows by action that we care about people" (Bailey 2014). While compromises with the mayor and more conservative democrats on the council significantly lowered the amount below the $15 per hour wage that many organizers were pushing, an ordinance raising the wage was eventually signed into law, and Louisville's status as a compassionate city is a central feature in the text of the ordinance itself explaining its rationale:

> WHEREAS, Louisville has been recognized as a Compassionate City it is incumbent upon us to take legislative steps to help lift working families out of poverty, decrease income inequality, and boost our economy (Metro Council 2014).

The mobilization of the city's official commitments to compassion, in the context of the minimum wage debate highlights the extent to which the language of compassion can and is used elastically, even where there are other frameworks through which to make political claims, including, in this case, a more traditional economic justice lens or even certain economic development discourses that prioritize 'skill' and 'innovation' over low labour costs. Compassion came to play such a visible role, we suggest, because so much of the passage of the ordinance depending on persuading or pressuring the mayor's office—and relatively more conservative democratic council representatives—to accept

an increase. In that context, the deployment of compassion could be seen as largely a strategic reaction to the mayor's own discourse, and one that, at least in the context of getting the ordinance passed, was successful.[4]

There are, in fact, relatively few political struggles in the city where the compassionate city idea has not been invoked in the years since the 2011 declaration—most of which go beyond the example of formal political debate within the metro council. For example, groups advocating for the removal of a statue honouring a confederate soldier have asked if a city that still honours the confederacy can legitimately call itself compassionate (see Figure 2). Local advocates have been waging a long campaign to secure more funding for the Louisville Affordable Housing Trust Fund in the city's budget, and ultimately to secure an independent, dedicated funding stream that would be partially immune from annual budget negotiations and changing political winds. At rallies and in local media spots, organizers have consistently used the idea of Louisville as a compassionate city to hold local politicians accountable for investing in affordable housing:

> "We have a tagline of being a compassionate city… You can't be compassionate if you've got people you're walking over while you're trying to get to your luxury amenities" (Ryan 2016).

While there have been increasing allocations for affordable housing in the city budget, the dedicated funding stream sought by activists has still not materialized and housing needs in the city continue to go unmet. Despite this marked shortage of affordable housing (Metropolitan Housing Coalition 2017), the city has invested millions of dollars towards the building of a new sports stadium, actively promoted the gentrification of neighbourhoods surrounding the downtown, and demolished public housing complexes, all of which displace residents. Even more vulnerable in the context of these policies are individuals without stable housing. As downtown and surrounding areas continue to gentrify, in early December of 2017, the city began to conduct a "clean up," destroying 'homeless' encampments in downtown. Homeless residents and their advocates took the mayor to task in protests questioning his commitment to compassion. Louisville resident Erica Williams stood at the gate entering the camp with more than a dozen protesters, carrying a sign that asked "Where is Your Compassion?" and saying, "It's not compassionate to bulldoze someone's shelter in the middle of winter" (Sayers and Bailey 2017). As a result of these protests, the city suspended the demolition of such encampments, and revised policies to allow a 21-day notice period before the encampments were removed. In response to the challenges questioning the city's compassion, the mayor responded at a press conference, "It shouldn't be a word that people use against each other for some reason when we fall short of what we're trying to do" (Bailey 2017). Rather than changing his policies to reflect compassion, the mayor seemed to want to control the terms on which compassion could and could not be used by residents of Louisville. While one might hope that compassionate response to homelessness would open up alternative possibilities, even when the mayor was challenged by protesters, the "clean up" simply proceeded with a short delay.[5]

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

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[4] The Kentucky Supreme Court would later overturn the minimum wage ordinance on the grounds that local governments do not have the authority to set a minimum wage higher than the one set in state law.

[5] At the same time, homelessness in the city *has* been the subject of increasing media attention and political debate since the events of 2017, and the metro government recently made a significant, though temporary, funding allocation to open 'low-barrier' shelters that can house individuals who might not be eligible for existing shelters.

Figure 2 Social media image posted by Parents for Social Justice in 2017.

Struggle over the city's response to anti-immigrant sentiment and policy highlights another important aspect of the politics of the compassionate city. Groups working to pressure the city government to declare itself a sanctuary city and discontinue cooperation with federal immigration authorities have repeatedly invoked the compassionate city idea, arguing that "a compassionate city is a sanctuary city". In the summer of 2018, groups working together as part of a coalition called Occupy ICE, led by Mijente Louisville and Black Lives Matter Louisville, set up a protest camp outside the federal building housing the local offices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. They named their camp, 'Camp Compasión.' From this camp, which organizers describes as offering "a model of radical love, hospitality, and resistance for all who built community with us" they advocated for abolishing ICE and put pressure on the mayor to declare the city a sanctuary city (Occupy ICE Louisville 2018). Beyond counter-mobilizing compassion in reaction to the city's commitments, this also gestures toward a more substantive development of compassion that specifically includes resistance to that which is not compassionate—a possibility seemingly foreclosed in the 'universal positivity' of the official compassion project. In that sense, Camp Compasión was not only an occupation of public space, but an occupation of compassionate city imaginary itself.

While the camp was eventually removed by the city before briefly remerging in a new location and being shut down a second time, the debates about sanctuary city status have continued. The city's government's official position is that they do not proactively enforce federal immigration law, but also that they are not a sanctuary city insofar as they continue to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement when requested. Responding to Occupy ICE, the mayor offered his compassionate city framing as an explicit *alternative* to the idea of a sanctuary city, which he asserts is "a political term" (McClaren and Rogers 2018). Here, we see the mayor as attempting to mobilize a kind of anti-political sentiment that sees politics as too polarizing or divisive and associating sanctuary with that division (cf. Clarke 2015). To be sure, a sanctuary declaration and an accompanying shift in policy could potentially divide the city from some of its federal funding and prove controversial among some city residents. But the idea that the replacement of sanctuary with compassion is somehow less political, in a substantive sense, again points to the depoliticizing use of compassion talk, and it does so from squarely within a particular political agenda pursued by the city's most powerful elected politician. This also highlights the problems posed by the 'universal positivity' of some compassion proponents, since sanctuary status clearly requires taking a stance *against* cooperation with federal immigration authorities.

That compassion talk has permeated political discourse in the city is broadly acknowledged. As part of his argument that more cities should commit to being compassionate cities, Louisville's mayor had this to say:

> When you declare that [you are a compassionate city], it raises the stakes. Things are always going on in a city, and some won't be so pleasant. Cynics will say, "Oh, there's an officer shooting—I thought we were a compassionate city. How can you justify that?" That encourages me, because it means people know we're trying to be something better than what we are (Fischer, quoted in Matthew 2017).

From our perspective, there is nothing cynical about holding a city government accountable for its commitments, but we also note here at least a partial acknowledgement that becoming a 'compassionate city' "raises the stakes" around injustices in the city. Karen Armstrong, the leading

force behind the Charter for Compassion, repeatedly asserts that "a compassionate city is an uncomfortable city" (Armstrong 2017). To the extent that this is true—or made true by activists placing demands on the city—we see something potentially worthwhile in these urban commitments to compassion.

Discussing the '9th street divide', which is a common short-hand for the racialized segregation and injustice that mark the city, one of the racial and economic justice activists quoted earlier effectively lays out what we understand as both an implicit critique and an alternative agenda for the compassionate city in Louisville:

> The way in which we are going to address this 9th street divide, for me, is going to say everything about whether or not we are truly a compassionate city… Until we really address the social and economic factors that divide east and west, we really won't get there. We've got to talk about employment, and we've got to talk about income inequality. We've got to talk about education. We've got to talk about all those issues. And act on them.

This alternative agenda proposed may not be precisely what proponents of compassionate city commitments in Louisville initially envisioned—and it may even make some of them uncomfortable—but it is one that is quite suggestive for making the compassionate city meaningful.

V. Conclusion: Raising the stakes on the compassionate city

Taken together, this research suggests that the 'compassionate city' imaginary in Louisville and beyond can be best understood in relation to its politics, rather than either the benevolent intentions of its proponents or to theoretical frames that reduce compassion to a singular logic to be critiqued. While such critiques can be invaluable, amidst the plurality of political action and claims-making in a city, it remains important to attend the different things that compassion might be made to mean. The politicization of the compassionate city idea carried out by activists is partially amenable to Davidson and Iveson's (2015) approach that identifies politics with the gap between the presupposition of equality and actually existing circumstances of inequality. One could, for example, productively understand Occupy ICE's Camp Compasión as a kind of verification of equality, in which those had no part in the compassionate city come forward to claim their place and thereby reconfigure its meaning. However, attending *only* to the logic of equality and to dissensus would risk leaving out specific contextual problems and questions raised by the compassionate city, including political conflicts over the meaning of compassion, the relative prioritization of compassion or justice, and the relationship between compassion and 'politics', as their meaning is constructed in political struggle. This is meant less to critique Davidson and Iverson's nuanced move toward universalization, and more to highlight the continuing necessity, as well, of more dialogical, contextually-dependent analyses of political action and claims-making (e.g. Darling 2014; Doshi and Ranganathan 2017; Leitner and Strunk 2014).

For proponents of compassionate city projects, we hope that our account of the politics of compassion in Louisville suggests some of the problems posed by an apolitical stance of 'universal positivity'. Such a stance is, we think, encouraged by the influence of much contemporary writing on compassion in scientific and therapeutic contexts that figures it as a 'win-win' orientation that can bring benefits both to the compassionate self and to those who interact with the compassionate person. However, when transposed into urban governance, such an apolitical positivity can become untenable in the face of persisting patterns of racialized precarity and violence. However, rather than attempting to further isolate compassion from politics, we argue for remaining open to the political struggles through which the stakes of being a compassionate city might be raised in ways that push

for more robust changes. In dialogue with scholars such as McKittrick (2016) and Cacho (2012), Elwood and Lawson develop a distinction between thinkable and unthinkable poverty politics, and we mobilize that distinction here to suggest the necessity of attending to the "unthinkable subjects, meanings, claims, relations, and actions" of compassion that exist beyond the bounds "of what can be under existing racial capitalist social orders" (Elwood and Lawson 2018: 2).

Whatever the fate of urban compassion projects—and it is too soon to say whether 'compassionate cities' will be an enduring feature of urban politics and governance in the way that their 'creative' or 'smart' counterparts have become—understanding what is going on when cities declare themselves to be compassionate can offer important insights to scholars, activists and policy-makers interested in creating more just and inclusive cities. Committed to the "the possibility of and demand for a constructive alternative" to an urban and global status quo of inequality, violence and precarity (Wilson and Catterall 2015: 131), we have tried to understand whether the compassionate city can be a part of these constructive alternatives. If left in the hands of city politicians and philanthropic elites without a vision of, as one of the activists we interviewed put it, systematic change, we are not particularly optimistic. However, as this research in Louisville illustrates, compassion, as politics, need not end where it begins, and the future of the compassionate city is still, in many ways, up for grabs.

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Figure 1. The Charter for Compassion text (https://charterforcompassion.org/charter/charter-overvew)

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

Figure 2. Social media image posted by Parents for Social Justice in 2017.

JOIN OUR CALL-IN DAY ON FRIDAY, AUGUST 18.

CASTLEMAN FOUGHT FOR THE CONFEDERACY.

HE SEGREGATED PARKS.

THEN HE HELPED ERECT A STATUE OF HIMSELF.

HE DOESN'T DESERVE TO BE HONORED IN OUR COMPASSIONATE CITY ANY LONGER.

TAKE THE STATUE DOWN.

Highlands residents (District 8): Call Councilman Brandon Coan at (502) 574-1108

Louisville residents: Call Mayor Greg Fischer at (502) 574-2003

Say: "I am your constituent and I'm in favor of the removal of the Castleman statue."

Parents for Social Justice